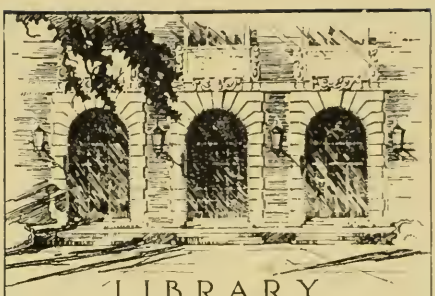

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MARY PRICE;

OR,

THE MEMOIRS OF A SERVANT-MAID.

CHAPTER I.

THE MOTHER'S SECRET.

With my earliest recollections are associated the kind and loving ways of good and affectionate parents; and although they were poor, they maintained themselves in a respectable position. My father was a journeyman-carpenter; and from all that I have ever learnt, as well as from the many circumstances impressed upon my memory, he must have been a very steady, temperate, and hard-working man. That he was devotedly at-

tached to my mother I have likewise the best possible reason to know; and that our little home was to all appearance one of the happiest in the town of Ashford, there could be no doubt. My mother was a very handsome woman, with fine dark hair and eyes, pale countenance, and a somewhat pensive if not positively melancholy expression. I remember, too, that she had a very fine set of teeth; and unlike most parents in humble life, she was very particular in making me, my brothers, and my sisters, also take care of our teeth. Amongst my girlish memories is likewise blended the fact that my father used frequently to laugh, in a good-humoured way, at the "genteel notions" which his wife endeavoured to instil into our minds; and on more occasions than one did I hear the neighbours' wives speak of my mother as being "the lady-like Mrs. Price," or as "the genteel wife of the carpenter."

Certain it is that my mother took very great pains to bring up myself, my brothers, and sisters, as tenderly and as respectably as she could. She taught us to read and write—gave us lessons in arithmetic, history, and geography—and imparted to us an amount of instruction which would alone be sufficient to prove that she was a very superior woman, considering her station as the wife of a humble journeyman-carpenter. She would not allow us to go to the Charity School, nor could she afford to let us attend any other school: but she took a pride in teaching us herself—and very competent she was to do it. That our father experienced the most affectionate gratitude towards her for the exemplary manner in which she thus sought to train us, was natural enough; and with the happiest reminiscences of my early years are mingled those scenes of domestic bliss, when seated at the cottage-portico on the summer evening, or before the cheerful fire on the winter's night, my father would take us upon his knees and bid us always love and be good unto the kind mother who kept us so neat and clean and taught us so many good things. Yet do I likewise remember that sometimes a sort of damp was thrown over these scenes by the deepening of the pensiveness of my mother's looks—or even by the actual trickling of tears down her cheeks; and then my father would beseech her to tell him whether she was unhappy—and if so, the reason why. But without giving him any direct answer, so far as I can remember, she would start from her seat, fling her arms about his neck, and exclaim, "Dearest Robert, you are the kindest and best of husbands! how can I be otherwise than happy?"

Regularly at an early hour in the morning did my father go to his work, always seeming cheerful and in good spirits; and when he returned home to his dinner at mid-day, or came back from work in the evening, he was ever in the same blythe mood. The neighbours used to say that Robert Price was the best-looking, the most contented, and the most industrious man in the town; and if ever Mr. Matthews, the master for whom he worked, called at our cottage, he was sure to compliment my mother on the neatness and cleanliness with which she kept it. Every Sunday morning we went to church; and though it was but a poor working man's family, yet I recollect full well many little incidents which prove that we were taken notice of by the richer folk, and that the Prices' children as well as their parents were held up as a pattern and an example to their neighbours.

I have entered into all these particulars that my readers may understand the good influences under which the earlier portion of my life and that of my brothers and sisters was passed. And here I should observe that we were five children in all—two brothers and three sisters. Robert (so named after our father) was the eldest: I came next: William was the third;—and then Sarah and Jane. From the youngest to the eldest we averaged two years between each other; and thus when Robert (the eldest) was thirteen years old, I was eleven, and the youngest was five. I have mentioned these particular ages because it was just at this period of our lives that an incident occurred which I must here record.

One forenoon, our father being at work as usual, we were all seated round the table receiving the wonted instruction from our mother, when she suddenly gave vent to an ejaculation which frightened us all and made us look quickly round towards the window on which our mother's eyes were settled at the time. In a tone strangely peremptory, however, and indeed most unusually abrupt and cross for her, she exclaimed, "Look at your books!"—and ever accustomed to yield ready obedience to our parents, we at once threw our eyes back again upon the lessons we were learning. But the glance which I and (as it subsequently appeared) Robert also had thrown round at the time, was quick enough to catch the countenance of some gentleman just at the instant it was vanishing from the window; and it struck me that his rudeness in staring in had startled my mother and made her cry out. But I recollect full well that my heart swelled at the moment and was ready to burst at the sharp angry manner in which she had spoken to us; and perhaps she saw the impression her words and manner had thus made: for she almost immediately said, "Cheer up, Mary dear. I did not mean to scold you, nor yet any of you." Then rising abruptly from her seat, she hastily kissed us all round—told us to mind and sit still till she came back—and went out, saying she should only be a minute or two. Thus, without stopping to put on bonnet or shawl, she issued forth, closing the door behind her.

I know not how it was, or what impulsive or instinctive feeling could have been stirring within me—being only eleven years old at the time—but sure enough it is that I experienced a certain sensation like a tightening at the heart, as if I had become suddenly aware that something was wrong, though what it was I could not conjecture. The same misgiving had struck Robert; and creeping round to me, he whispered, "Mary dear, did you see how odd mother looked when she went out?"

"Hush!" whispered I: "we must not talk on those things—we ought not even to see them. Besides, you were told not to leave your seat, Robert——"

"But I feel as if something bad was going to happen," he answered in a low and mournful voice. "Did you see that gentleman who looked in at the window?"

"Yes," I replied. "I suppose it was some rude person staring in upon us."

"I don't know," said Robert in a strange tone and also with a peculiar look. "I have seen that gentleman once before look in at the window in

just the same way; and *then* mother went out as she has done *now*."

At this moment the door opened, and Robert instantaneously glided back to his seat—but not so quickly as to escape the notice of our mother as she re-entered the cottage. I glanced around instinctively. She was pale—deadly pale—and, Oh! so sad-looking, at the moment she appeared on the threshold: but the very next instant, as she caught sight of Robert speeding back to his seat the colour rushed to her cheeks again and mounted up to her very forehead. Her eyes also seemed to brighten up—or rather to flash in a manner I had never noticed before; and indeed I was so frightened at this sudden change in her manner, that I hastily turned my head again and kept my eyes fixed on my lesson-book. It seemed to me as if I had suddenly beheld my mother in a new light—as if all in a moment something had been revealed to me which raised up a vague and unknown uneasiness in my mind, shaking as it were the sublime faith which I had previously held in her perfection. It may easily be supposed, indeed, how strong was the impression which this scene made upon my mind, since I am able so accurately to describe it now.

Returning to her seat, my mother proceeded to hear us say our lessons as usual. As I stood before her with my book in my hand, I raised my eyes timidly up to her countenance; and I could not help noticing that she looked at me in return, not with the same placid affectionate gaze as was her wont, but in a manner which I scarcely comprehended *then*, but which I am now able to describe as the quick, keen, searching glance of uneasiness. However, she said nothing at the time; but when the usual routine of the morning's instruction was over, she bade William, Sarah, and Jane go out and play in the little front garden, keeping Robert and myself in the room with her. Then, as soon as he and I were thus alone with her, she drew us towards her—and looking us both steadfastly in the face, said, "My dear children, I am going to ask you something, and I know you will tell me the truth." She paused; and then added in a tremulous tone, "Robert, what were you doing out of your seat?—or rather, what had you been saying to Mary, while I went out for a minute or two?"

"Nothing, mother," answered Robert with an effrontery which absolutely startled me: for though on some previous occasions I had seen proofs of great boldness on my eldest brother's part—a boldness, too, for which he had been blamed—I was not prepared to see him adopt such a *very* bold and daring attitude as this.

"Now, Robert, you are telling me a story, and this is very wicked of you:" then turning to me, my mother said, "You, dear little Mary, will tell me the truth. What was Robert doing out of his place?"

"He came and whispered to me that he had seen a gentleman looking in at the window," was the answer which I returned in spite of the threatening shake of the head that Robert gave at the moment: "and I told him that I had likewise seen the gentleman. Then he said he had seen that same gentleman look in once before, and you went out then as you did to-day. But don't be angry with Robert, mother."

"No," was her calm reply: and yet it struck me at the moment that a strange expression, which I can now understand to have been one of an excruciating anguish that she sought to subdue, passed over her countenance: "I will not be angry with him—I have no right to be angry with him! But listen to me, my dear children. That gentleman"—and here she raised her handkerchief to her eyes for a moment, and I caught a sound like a stifled sob—"that gentleman," she almost immediately continued, but in a strange voice that well nigh terrified me, "came to deliver some message of no very great consequence. But do not tell your father that you saw him. Now promise me, Robert—and you too, little Mary—that you will not think any more of this circumstance; and at all events that you will not say a word about it. Remember it is your own mother who asks it."

"Oh! I will forget it this moment," I exclaimed, throwing myself upon her bosom and winding my arms around her neck.

Robert too, much moved and no doubt sorry for the falsehood he had told, joined in this tender scene; and our mother strained us both to her breast with a degree of emotion which was really the vent she sought for feelings that had been profoundly stirred. Again and again did she thus embrace us, appearing even to mourn and sorrow over us, and calling us her "dear, dear children," in a tone that struck me at the time, young as I was, as having something ominous in it and fraught with apprehensions of coming evil.

The incident which I have just related made a deep impression upon me; but Robert soon appeared to have forgotten it altogether. Indeed, there can be no possible harm, considering all that has since occurred in my here mentioning that Robert had already given evidence of a callous, indifferent, and even perverse disposition. He was as yet too young to be actually heartless, and had not come sufficiently in contact with the world to develope any of those bad qualities the germs of which existed within him: but he was not even then altogether so good a lad as he ought to have been; and in the same way that the reader has just seen him utter a bold falsehood in order to avoid an expected scolding, did he frequently conceal his boyish misdeeds by an audacious denial. At least this began to be particularly the case during the two or three years that followed the incident which I have just related; and once when I remonstrated with him for having told what I knew to be an untruth, he said in a dogged tone of retort, "Well, mother once told us not to tell something to father, and that's a sort of falsehood; so that I am only doing for myself what she made me do for her."

This answer affected me strangely. It all in a moment opened my eyes to something which I had suspected but dimly and vaguely before. I said to myself, "Could it possibly be that my mother was doing something wrong on that occasion, and that she really sought to conceal it from my father? No—it is impossible. She is all goodness—all virtue: she would not do anything wrong for the world. Everybody says she is the best of wives; and I know she is the best of mothers."

Thus did I reason with myself. And yet I was not convinced. My confidence in the perfection of that mother whom I loved so tenderly, was now far more seriously shaken than at the time when

the occurrence itself took place. Robert's words had sunk deep into my soul; and I had attained an age, being now about fourteen, when they were indeed full well calculated to make such a vivid impression upon me and set me a-thinking most seriously and also most sadly. Yet of what did I suspect my mother? to what did my misgivings seem to point? I knew not. Too inexperienced to be able to give form and substance to my own thoughts, I felt uneasy without comprehending the cause of this uneasiness: suspicion was gradually gathering strength in my breast; and yet I knew not what I suspected nor even what there possibly could be to suspect. But still I felt unhappy; and being even from my tenderest years of a pensive disposition, I thought much in secret on the subject that thus troubled me.

Nevertheless, when at other times I gazed upon that handsome but pale countenance, with its mingled expression of goodness and melancholy—or when I listened to the words of instruction and the inculcations of religion that flowed from my mother's lips—and when I beheld her kneeling by my father's side in the fine old church, listening to the syllables of hope and life which came from the eloquent preacher's tongue—I said to myself, "Yes, my mother is indeed the best of women! She did nothing wrong and meant nothing wrong, when she bade her children keep that secret from her husband."

In this manner did I endeavour to reassure myself: but more frequently still did I feel the suspicions and misgivings settling themselves upon my mind, even to the dethronement of those arguments wherewith I sought to compel and constrain a belief in the purity and innocence of my mother's intention relative to the secret which she had so earnestly enjoined Robert and me to keep.

CHAPTER II.

THE LETTER WITH THE BLACK SEAL.

I was now a little past fifteen years of age. Robert was over seventeen; and though bearing a strong resemblance to our mother, was yet not a good-looking lad. There was something sinister in his looks; and when he was speaking, an unpleasant feeling would arise in the mind that he was not telling the truth—or at all events that duplicity and artifice were in his language and his intentions. Not that he had done anything at all serious in the way of misconduct: but, as I have before stated, he manifested a great disregard for truth; and I may now add that he was neither so industrious nor so steady as he ought to have been. Our father had got him apprenticed to Mr. Matthews, the master for whom he worked; but amongst the journeymen in the same employ, they were not all so steady and regular in their habits as our father; and unfortunately Robert preferred the company that was least calculated to benefit him. My mother frequently remonstrated with him,—pointing out the value of good habits and an honest character as evidenced in the example of our father; and showing how irregularity of conduct was certain to undergo opprobrium and reproach, as in the case of two very wicked fellows, named Bulldog and Sawbridge, who were the scandal and nuisance of the whole town. But despite the gentle though earnest remonstrances of our mother, Robert's callousness evidently gained ground; and he either made no answer to her representations or else walked indifferently away. His father did not seem to take so much notice of his little acts of irregularity or unsteadiness: or if he did, he set them down to the inexperience of youth and contented himself with the belief that any tendency to wildness, manifested at such an age, would in due time wear away.

My brother William, who at the period of which I am now writing was thirteen years old, was very different from Robert in many respects. Bearing however the same striking resemblance to our mother, he possessed all the openness and frankness of her countenance. Tall for his age, slightly built, and of a somewhat delicate appearance, he was a most interesting boy—affectionate, kind-hearted, and of generous disposition—moreover, a sincere lover of the truth. His intelligence was likewise greater than that of Robert; and though four years younger than his elder brother, he was much a-head of him in all mental acquirements. William was indeed a most promising child even from his earliest years; and when attired in his neat Sunday apparel, I have heard the remark frequently whispered, "That is young William Price: what a genteel boy for a carpenter's son!"

My sister Sarah, at this time eleven years old, was a beautiful girl, the miniature image of her mother. Nothing could exceed the luxuriance of her black hair: romance-writers would speak of its silken softness and its raven glossiness: but without any exaggeration I mean to say it was the finest hair that ever formed an ebon crown for one of our sex. Her eyes too were wondrously fine. And here I am likewise avoiding anything like extreme expressions; but when I declare that in no child of eleven years old did I ever see eyes so large, so black, and so softly bright as those of my sister Sarah, I am only telling the plain truth. Her symmetry for a child of her age was perfect: her features had the Grecian outline—her hands and feet were delicate to a degree. In a word, she gave promise of growing up into a beautiful girl, and if permitted to live, of expanding into a splendid womanhood.

As for the youngest of us all, little Jane—then nine years old—she was a fat, chubby, blue-eyed, brown-haired girl, with a certain distant resemblance to the mother, but with all the distinctive features resembling those of the father. Good-natured, gay, and happy, she was always the darling (as the youngest, it was her right to be) of the family; and it is impossible to conceive a greater contrast between two sisters than that which existed between this cherub-looking Jane and the serious, selfish, vain, and prideful Sarah—for all this my sister assuredly was, even in her girlhood!

And now that I have so fully introduced my parents and my brothers and sisters to the reader, perhaps he will wish to know something concerning myself. At the age and under the circumstances which I am thus penning my autobiography, it may be permitted for me to say, without the imputation of vanity, that I was considered to be a good-looking girl, in the same style as my mother and sister Sarah: that is, with dark hair and eyes, very little colour upon the cheeks, and somewhat delicate fea-

tures. I have already hinted that through the care of our mother we possessed good teeth; and I was not an exception to this rule. As for my stature, when I grew up to womanhood I was what is termed above the middle height and the least thing inclined to be stout. But enough, at least for the present, of any details relative to my personal appearance; and I now resume the thread of my narrative.

One day—and never, never can I cease thinking of that memorable day—William, Sarah, Jane, and myself were seated with our mother in the neat little parlour of our cottage. It was about eleven in the forenoon; and William was reading while the rest of us were engaged with the needle. Suddenly we heard my brother Robert's voice in altercation with some one outside the dwelling: and listening, the words "Give me the letter, I say!" fell upon our ears. My mother immediately gave vent to an ejaculation as if struck by a sudden idea; and flinging down her work, she hastened out of the cottage. It was summer-time; and the front door stood open. I looked round without moving from my seat: for I felt a presentiment that this was some new phase in the history of *my mother's secret*—and not for worlds would I have given her pain by any display of impertinent curiosity. I saw Robert, in his working-dress and with his brown paper cap upon his head, holding by the collar a short, thick-set, half-loutish, half-idiot youth who did odd jobs about the outskirts of the town and was known as Mad Tommy. This individual, who was about twenty years of age and dressed in coarse, dirty, and patched corduroy, was gazing with an air of stolid and yet savage defiance at Robert, who again shook him violently, crying, "Then you won't give me the letter—eh? But here's mother herself!"

"For shame, Robert—unhand the poor fellow," she said; "why did you molest him?"

"I met him here at the gate," replied Robert sullenly, "and asked him what he wanted. He said he had got a letter for you. I told him to give it to me, and I would take it in to you. He declared he would do no such thing—that he would not trust me with it——"

"No more I would," exclaimed Mad Tommy: "not likely—not likely!" and he rubbed his hands, at the same time giving a cunning leer at my mother.

"Enough, enough!" she hastened to exclaim in a tone and manner which I could not help observing were both alike full of trepidation: but suddenly assuming a conciliatory and caressing voice, she said, "Now, Mr. Thomas, what have you got for me? Give it to me; and here is something for you;"—at the same time taking a small silver coin from her pocket.

"No, no—not likely, not likely!" exclaimed the idiot, shaking his head with a look of what may be termed vacant knowingness. "The gentleman told me to be sure and not take anything for bringing up the letter, and also to mind and not drop it in the gutter—or forget it——"

"Well, well, give it to me," said my poor mother, evidently suffering the excruciation of a strange and wild uneasiness, which was nevertheless all the more poignant because she sought to conceal it; for the eye of her eldest son—then a youth of past seventeen and keenly alive to suspicion—was fixed upon her with a gaze full of doubt and mistrust.

Mad Tommy handed her a letter sealed with black wax, and then quickly turning on his heel, darted away, shouting, "Not likely, not likely that I should go taking anything for my trouble—not likely, not likely!"

Meanwhile my mother, having taken the letter in her hand, hastily thrust it into her bosom; and then looking up at Robert, she said in a low tremulous voice, "What brought you home from your work before the usual hour?"

"I came to fetch something that father wants," was the answer. "But what is the matter with you, mother?" he inquired, looking so fixedly at her that I thought to myself this was the most cruel display of inconsiderateness and want of feeling on his part towards her, that I had ever yet observed.

"What is the matter with me?" she repeated in her own sweet soft voice, but which now seemed to bear in its tone the vibrations which came direct from her heart's core. "Nothing—nothing is the matter with me:"—then, after a few moments' hesitation and speaking with a visible effort as if conquering a repugnance, she said, "This letter, Robert, is from a dear friend, but one whom your father likes not. It will be doing me a service not to notice before him that I have received this letter."

"I am sure I don't want to betray your secrets, mother, if you will keep mine," said Robert, in a rude and dogged manner. "Therefore, if you do happen to see me go into the *Three Bells* again, mind you don't tell father of it, as you did last Saturday night—or else I shall let the cat out of the bag in return about your letter, so as to have tit for tat."

"Robert—this from *you!*" exclaimed—nay, almost shrieked our mother; and I saw her step back a pace or two as if struck with a sudden blow of a hammer: then she stood gazing in the stupor of amazement at Robert, as if she dared not believe and yet knew not how to doubt the evidence of her own ears and eyes.

"Lor, mother, don't be foolish now," he said with a look of indifference, slightly tainted with scorn: "we don't want any sentimental nonsense now. A bargain's a bargain: you receive your letters on the sly, and I'll go to the public-house on the sly—but we won't tell of each other."

"Good heavens! is it possible you can speak to me thus?" exclaimed my poor mother, joining her hands in despair.

But Robert took no farther notice of her: on the contrary, he entered the house, procured some tool which he had come to fetch, and was issuing forth again, when his mother, who was now standing upon the threshold, said to him in a low plaintive voice, "Have you forgotten, Robert, all the tenderness I have had for you—all the love I have shown you—all the devoted care I have bestowed upon you?"

"Well, I don't deny it," he answered in a voice of positive brutality: "but I am no longer a child—I am a young man now, and I mean to let you know it too. So I shall go to the *Three Bells* when I choose and smoke my pipe; and you will tell father that you sent me on an errand. If you don't, then out shall come all about the gentleman looking in at the window three or four years ago, and your going out to him—then this letter business now——"

"Robert, Robert, what have you done?" I exclaimed, darting from my seat as I beheld our poor mother suddenly stagger on the threshold of the door; and the next moment, just as I was about to extend my arms to save her, she fell headlong.

Her brow came in violent contact with the little red brick pathway leading from the front door to the wicket-gate of the garden—and there she lay senseless. All was now horror and confusion in the house. Robert, doubtless conscience-stricken for what he had done, hastily helped me to raise her: but poor William, springing forward, pushed his elder brother aside, exclaiming bitterly, "O Robert, Robert! it is you who have done this!"—and then, while the tears poured down the generous boy's countenance, he assisted me to convey our still senseless parent into the bedroom, Sarah and little Jane following us in consternation.

There was a large contusion on my mother's forehead, and an abrasion of the skin: but no blood came. I bathed her head with vinegar-and-water, and still life returned not. I tore open her dress, from which the letter fell at my feet: but there I let it lay, having no thought for anything save my dear beloved parent. Life was not extinct—for her lips quivered slightly; and a pulsation, feeble though it were, was felt at the heart. Vainly however did I give her air—vainly continue to bathe her head and hold vinegar to her nostrils: she still lay senseless upon the couch. William was well nigh distracted; and yet he vented no more reproaches upon Robert, who stood by evidently a prey to remorse. Poor little Jane was now crying bitterly, while Sarah endeavoured to console her. As for my own feelings, they can be better imagined than described—although, as I have ere now said, I had no leisure for thought: yet it was in a state bordering upon frenzied excitement that I continued my attentions towards the still inanimate form of my mother.

"You must go for Mr. Collins," said I, meaning the surgeon: and away sped both William and Robert at the same time.

About ten minutes now elapsed, and still my mother continued insensible. Yet I knew she was not dead, because there was an occasional twitching of the lip and quivering of the closed eyelids. I could also feel the beating of her heart, but feeble as that of an infant. Forgotten was the letter—the unfortunate letter—which lay at my feet: but through the tumultuous crowd of my agonizing ideas, penetrated as it were distinct and poignant the sense of all the heartless cruelty of Robert's conduct towards that parent who had loved him so tenderly and so well.

At the expiration of the ten minutes Robert came back accompanied by our father, who was already dreadfully agitated at the tidings he had heard, and who now became almost frantic when he found that his beloved wife was still wrapt in a trance that so near approximated unto that of death.

"Where is William? Is Mr. Collins coming?" I demanded, in the intense haste of anguished excitement.

"William is gone for him," answered Robert; "while I went and fetched father."

"O God! spare my dear, dear wife!" was now the cry which went thrillingly forth from the lips of my father as he bent over the still inanimate form of her whom he loved. "Open your eyes—speak—look up at me—say that you know me—— O heavens! give some sign of life—depart not thus—'tis I, your husband, who implore you to look up at him!"—and then my distracted father covered the marble countenance of my mother with his wild and passionate caresses.

"Father, dear father," I ventured to murmur, half mad with grief though I was, "this is not the way to recover her! Let me continue to bathe her forehead until Mr. Collins comes——Ah! thank heaven, here he is!"

For at the moment William returned, accompanied by the worthy and kind-hearted surgeon, who immediately proceeded to open a vein in my mother's arm. A dead silence now prevailed in the room—a silence awful in the suspense wherewith it seemed to be laden. And there did we all stand around, with gaze intently fixed upon the surgeon's countenance—watching each feature, each line, each lineament, for the slightest expression that might give some assurance of hope. For myself, I know that my very breath was suspended: my heart had as it were ceased to beat—the blood felt as if it were suddenly struck stagnant in my veins—yet not frozen, for it burnt with a torturing sensation.

"There is hope," said Mr. Collins, at length breaking the awful silence: "indeed, there is every hope," he added, as the blood flowed freely from my mother's arm: and in less than another minute she began to give short quick gaspings, as if returning animation was accompanied by a sense of pain.

In a few minutes more she opened her eyes feebly and slowly: but they beamed not with the rays of consciousness, though with the light of life—and she almost immediately closed them again. Shudderingly I whispered a brief and hurried query in the doctor's ear.

"Will she live?" I asked.

"I hope so—I believe so," he replied emphatically. "Life is returning quickly:" then after another interval of a few minutes, although the patient's eyes still remained closed, he gave still more cheering and positive assurances.

"Tell me, Mary," said my father, now drawing me a little aside and speaking in a low whisper, "how this happened. Robert gave me some hurried particulars; but I was too excited to understand them. I however recollect that he said something about having had a few words with his mother about a letter; but he begged me not to say anything about it before her——Ah! what is this?"—and advancing towards the bed, my father stooped down and picked up the letter on which his eyes had that moment settled.

"Father, you will not read it?" I said, laying my hand upon his as he was about to break the black seal: for at the instant a presentiment of evil pierced through me like an electric shock from head to foot, and I believe that I must have looked with deprecating and frightened regard up into his countenance.

"Why not, Mary?" he asked with a sort of half smile, as if the bare idea of not opening the letter were too ridiculous to be entertained seriously. "Your mother and I have no secrets from each other—we never have had—and you may depend upon it that she would have shown me this letter

of her own accord the moment I returned, if this sad occurrence had not taken place:"—and he glanced towards the bed.

I felt assured that my mother would *not* have shown him the letter: but I dared not say so. Nor could I any farther urge him not to open it. No—nor was there even time to do so, if I had been disposed; for the seal was already breaking between his fingers—the letter was unfolding—and now, stepping towards the window, he began to run his eyes over its contents.

Heavens! how can I find words to describe the scene which followed?—how can I describe the awful change that suddenly seized upon my father? What words are strong enough to pourtray the wild look of incredulity which he first flung upon that letter—then the expression of profound horror into which this look deepened the next moment—then the blank, the unutterable despair which succeeded, rendering his countenance white and ghastly, making him stagger back and press his hand upon his heart, while the ejaculation of "O God! O God!" rose to his lips, but fell faint and low therefrom.

All this dreadful scene—all these quick transitions of mental agony—took place in less than half a minute, while I was standing by paralysed with dread horror. Suddenly inspired with the energy of desperation, I was about to put some question to my father, when advancing towards the couch, he pushed the doctor abruptly aside, and then stood gazing for a few moments with a strange and unnatural stedfastness upon the countenance of his wife. I had followed him mechanically from the window to the bed; and methought, young as I was, that I could read in his blank despairing looks a portion of the agony that was torturing his soul. I fancied indeed that he was contemplating my mother with the forlorn and appalled air of one who, having a veil suddenly torn from his eyes and enabled to read some fearful secret, keeps asking himself, "Is it possible? is it possible? My God! can it be?"

Mr. Collins surveyed him in astonishment—Robert was more deeply moved than he had been for some years past; while William, understanding that something was wrong, but not comprehending what it could be, gazed with mingled suspense and terror depicted in his eloquent features. As for Sarah and little Jane, they actually retreated into a corner, cowed, overawed, and alarmed, at the strange and unnatural aspect which their father wore.

But let me not linger at any unnecessary length upon this scene of memorable horror. Suddenly starting from the impalement of those agonised feelings which had transfixed him, and with the letter—the fatal letter—escaping from his hand, most likely unobserved by himself,—my father turned away, advanced a pace or two like one who walks in a dream, then suddenly stopped short again—folded his arms across his breast—and slowly cast his eyes around upon his children. In that deliberate and measured look he embraced us all—and Oh! what a world of feeling was there in the despair of that last look, the dimness of which was thus shed upon us!

The next moment, with a sudden ejaculation of rage, resembling the yell of a savage beast, my father shot away from our presence, and speeding forth from the cottage, rushed towards the fields. I was on the point of flying after him; and William with the same intent had already bounded towards the door, when my mother suddenly started up in the couch, opened her eyes, and gazed wildly around her. Whether it was that by some subtle and unknown influence communicating between mind and mind without the aid of voice and ears, she had been made to comprehend what had just taken place on the part of her husband—or whether her abrupt return to life at this very moment was a mere coincidence, I know not: but certain it is that it added to the mystic horror of the scene.

In the wild quick glance which she flung around she appeared to embrace all the features of the group, while the presence of the surgeon and her own still bleeding arm at once made her aware of the danger through which she had passed. But while the first sense of all this must have been thrilling in the brain, her eyes fell on the letter which her husband had left lying on the bed: and the moment she saw that it was open, she fell back upon the pillow—gave one wild thrilling shriek of mortal agony—and the next moment became still as death.

And it was in death's stillness, too, that she now lay!

CHAPTER III.

THE CUP OF MISFORTUNE FILLED TO THE BRIM.

Although she had no sooner breathed her last than the conviction of the fearful truth flashed to my soul, yet I refused to believe it. No—it was not possible: at least it seemed not possible to me! To think that one who had scarcely entered her thirty-sixth year, and was therefore but in the prime of life as she was also in the vigour of health and in the bloom of beauty,—to think, I say, that she who half-an-hour before had been seated tranquilly and serenely with us in the little parlour, should in that short space of time have gone through so many phases of suffering and then sunk out of existence, was scarcely credible. At all events to my young mind, sanguine with the hopes of fifteen summers and but little experienced from the world's teachings of as many winters, it appeared next to impossible that a fond parent was gone, never to return! William shared all my ineffable anguish—shared also that incredulity which still conjured up hope because hope was so necessary where it was so much dreaded to look despair in the face. Robert stood with folded arms, gazing down upon the marble and motionless features of the dead: but the tears which trickled down his cheeks, the stifling sobs which convulsed his heart, and the working of his lips, showed how deeply his sullen and callous nature was agitated now. As for Sarah, she seemed to be struck with a kind of intuitive conviction that *this* was death whereon she gazed: but little Jane, having no power of such conception, crept away from Sarah, and embracing my knees, asked in a low frightened tone, "what was the matter with mamma? and why the naughty man" (meaning the surgeon) "had made her arm bleed?"

Then did all the pent-up emotions of my agonizing soul find vent in a flood of bitterest weeping;

and sinking upon a chair, I caught up my little sister upon my knees and strained her to my bosom —for I felt—O cruelly, deeply felt—that I was left in the world to be unto her a mother now!

At the expiration of a few minutes after the vital spirit had fled for ever, Mr. Collins, who was himself much affected by this scene, gently urged that we should retire into the parlour; and we all followed his kindly-given advice. But ere he led me from the chamber of death, I bent over my departed parent and imprinted a kiss upon her countenance, where death's awful rigidity was already settling: then, as I was about to turn away and quit the room, I saw Robert stretch forth his hand to take the letter, which lay on the coverlid, close indeed by one of the now wax-like hands of the departed.

"You must not touch that letter, Robert," I said in a tone which even startled myself with its deep sepulchral accents: then instantaneously turning towards the surgeon, I observed, "That letter, sir, contains my mother's secret; and whatever it be it must be kept inviolable so far as her children are concerned."

"I understand you, Mary," replied Mr. Collins; and taking up the letter, he at once consigned it to his pocket, adding, "You are desirous that it should remain in my keeping?"

I threw upon him a look of gratitude, for my heart was now too full to speak: and then I proceeded to the parlour in company with the kind surgeon, and followed by my brothers and sisters.

Having gently and mildly reasoned with us upon the necessity of enduring our misfortune with Christian resignation, Mr. Collins proceeded to observe that he would cause an immediate search to be instituted for our father. He likewise intimated, with all the delicacy of a truly generous heart, that the funeral arrangements should be conducted on a scale of respectability, and that there were no doubt benevolent persons in Ashford who would join in providing the means

to defray the expenses, should our father prove to be without the requisite funds. He likewise added that as there must be a Coroner's Inquest, and it might be necessary to show the letter, he would take care its contents should not transpire to the public, if they were of a nature to render it desirable to suppress them. The worthy man then departed, promising to return and see us in the evening.

Hours passed, and still our father, now a widower, returned not. What could have become of him? Had he intended to leave his home for ever? and was that the farewell glance that he flung around him ere he sped forth so wildly from the chamber which a few minutes after became that of death? In a word, had our sire—our only surviving parent—deserted his home and his children altogether? I knew not what to think, but was racked with sore misgivings. Not once however, did I allow my thoughts to pause, as it were, to speculate on what might have been the contents of that letter with the black seal. As I had said before, it was *my mother's secret;* and I would no more have thought of penetrating it than I would have dreamt of violating the sanctity of that grave to which her remains were shortly to be consigned.

It was summer time when these dreadful incidents occurred: and just as the sun was making the western horizon glow with its departing beams, the little wicket gate of the garden opened, and Tommy the idiot slowly advanced up to the entrance of the cottage, where his uncouth form remained darkening the open door-way. But there was a strange expression on his countenance—a look of mingled vacuity and horror, as if he had become the depositor of some dreadful secret, which, while it implanted its strongest terrors in his soul, threw all his ideas into worse confusion and bewilderment than before.

For more than a minute did he remain on the threshold, gazing in upon us, an afflicted group of bereaved children, as we sat altogether with our hands locked in each other's clasp and looking eloquent in the deep silence of our grief. We thought that having heard of the dread calamity which had taken place, he was come with the well-meaning purpose of bestowing his compassion upon us; and therefore we approached him not—nor did we think it necessary to ask him what he wanted. But presently he advanced slowly into the room; and coming close up to us, he said in a strange tone and with a still stranger look, "Gone, gone—both parents gone! They told me that the mother was dead—and I saw the father——"

Now we all started from our seats, and with streaming eyes and frantic accents entreated our informant to explain his meaning—to tell us what he knew—and to give us, in fine, some definite tidings, even though they might be the worst, of our father!

"I shouldn't keep it from you," he said, gazing upon us more strangely than ever; "no, no—'tis not likely, 'tis not likely. Down by the river just now—I saw it all—throat cut first—plunge in afterwards—dreadful, dreadful!"

It would be impossible for words to describe the anguish which was excited in that cottage-parlour by the dimly obscure yet frightfully intelligible revelation which Mad Tommy had just made in his peculiar manner. Robert and William resolved to go with the idiot at once to the spot where the catastrophe alluded to had taken place—while I remained with the girls. Away they went: and as they afterwards told me, they called at a neighbour's, who went with them, taking drags and lanterns.

The river Stour runs at a distance of about half a mile to the south of Ashford. It is in that part a narrow stream, but in some places very deep. Running through the verdant meadows, and meandering its way amidst some of the most beautiful parts of Kent, it gradually widens until it becomes broad and deep enough at Sandwich to afford a haven for two-mast ships; and a little farther on it falls into the sea near Ramsgate.

For upwards of two hours were my brothers absent on this dreadful night. The sun went down—darkness fell upon the earth—I closed the cottage-door—my little sisters, worn out with fatigue, fell asleep—and I remained alone as it were in the house. Yes—the sleep of life in one room and the sleep of death in another made the cottage then a solitude for me! Methought the candle never burnt so dim. Not that I was afraid—not that I was superstitious. O no—I knew that even if the shade of the departed should be permitted to rise up before me, it would not be to scare but to console me—not to curse but to bless me. I knelt down and prayed. Never, never had I prayed so fervently before! But my heart was so full—Oh! it was so full—I wonder it did not burst.

At length, when two mortal hours had expired, Robert and William came back. Mad Tommy had in the first instance conducted them to a place on the river bank where there were foot-marks, and blood-stains, and a deep trace in the grass as if a body, falling down in that spot, had slid by its own weight or else crept down into the river. On the bank a knife stained with blood was picked up: it was our father's knife. The drags were used—but all to no purpose. The river was however swollen with recent heavy rains, and the corpse might have been carried onward with the rapid current to be ultimately wafted to the sea, there to become a prey to the unknown monsters of the deep.

The inference from all that could be gleaned from Mad Tommy, and from the traces observed on the river's bank by the aid of the lanterns, was that our unfortunate father, goaded to desperation by the discovery of that secret which the letter revealed, but which we dared not penetrate, had inflicted a wound upon himself on the bank and had either fallen or else crept down into the water. But whatever were the circumstances of the terrible deed, it seemed clear enough to us that we were now orphans in the wide world—orphans at our tender age when the experiences of that world were so utterly wanting to us—orphans indeed, dependent on the bounty of those benevolent persons whom our calamities suddenly made our friends!

On the following day an inquest was held upon the remains of our departed mother; and it being ascertained that she had a long standing disease of the heart, a verdict was returned in accordance therewith. Whether the letter was produced or not, I do not know. The whole affair relative to the inquisition was managed so quietly, delicately, and speedily—thanks to Mr. Collins—that it was a solace to have so well got rid of such an unpleasant ceremo-

nial, and I felt no inclination to dwell unnecessarily upon it. In these respects my dear brother William resembled me; and Robert, even if he felt inclined to ask any questions, ventured not to do so. The letter accordingly remained with Mr. Collins, unasked for though not forgotten; and he through motives of delicacy made no allusion to it.

Those who have lost near and dear relatives and who have had funerals in their houses, know full well how sad and sorrowful a period it is between the moment when the breath goes forth from the body and that when the body itself is consigned to its last home. To say nothing of those frequent outbursts of anguish to which the tortured heart gives vent—to say nothing either of those moments of profound despondency when the spirit sinks entirely within, as if itself were drooping down into the grave, while the eye remains tearless and the countenance bears the stamp of an ineffable woe—to say nothing of such intervals as these, there is a sufficiency of torture to be felt and gloom to overshadow the soul as the sombre details of the funeral preparatives develop themselves. The measuring for the mourning—the low voice in which every body speaks, as if stricken with the sense that it is the house of death—the slow, cautious, stealthy manner in which the undertaker and his men creep about, and in and out the chamber of the dead—the old nurse who persists in giving you some details of the appearance of the corpse when she dressed it in the garments of the grave, and how she has heard its bones crack during the process of elongation—then the secret manner in which the coffin is borne in to the darkened room of death—the sad, sad ceremony of taking the last, last look at the marble features of her who is gone—then the deep sinking at the stomach, and tightening of the heart, and suffocation of the throat which are experienced during that dread hour when the screwing down of the lid is taking place—next the circumstance so astonishing and so revolting to those who are mourning for the lost one, that the manager and the myrmidons of the solemn ceremony are partaking of ardent spirits around the narrow receptacle of the dead,—all these are the heart's bitterest, direst experiences in the school of sorrow!

But when the moment comes to see the coffin borne forth from that home where the loved one, who is now cold and stiff within that narrow box of ominous shape, was once the source of happiness and love, the centre of the heart's best and purest affections,—to know, to feel, and to say unto one's-self that the being so loved has gone never to return,—'tis now that the heart sinks more profoundly than ever. But the keenest excruciation of all—the agony of agonies—the moment of the soul's crucifixion is yet to come: and it is felt, when, the coffin being lowered into the grave, the clay falls heavy, dull, and sullen like lumps of lead on the lugubriously sounding lid!

But wherefore should I dwell longer upon these harrowing reflections? why have I dwelt upon them so long at all? It is not because I could now sit calmly and dispassionately down to write of feelings so fraught with anguish, experienced years ago: but it is because the memory of the solemn occasion calls up for the moment all the pristine vividness and intenseness of those feelings, that I depict them thus, in order to show how dear to me was my beloved mother *then*—how dear her memory continues now!

To resume. The funeral was over—and for a few weeks we were left alone together in the cottage to solace each other and to allow time for the first fever-heat of our afflictions to subside. At last Mr. Collins, who had frequently visited us, intimated one day that if we felt in the humour for serious conversation, he wished to discourse with us on our future prospects. We at once signified our readiness to listen to him who had proved so kind a benefactor to us. At least such were the terms in which Robert, William, and myself spoke: for of course Sarah and poor little Jane were too young to comprehend the extent of Mr. Collins's kindness or the seriousness of the discussion that was now to take place.

The worthy surgeon proceeded to talk to us in the kindest manner, and to develop the plans which he had chalked out for our future proceedings. Robert was already apprenticed to Mr. Matthews the carpenter; and his master had now consented to take him to live in his house altogether. Mr. Collins proposed to take William into his service—first as errand-boy, and subsequently, if he got on well, to be taught how to compound and dispense medicines so that he might attend in the surgery. A charitable but somewhat eccentric old lady, named Whitfield, had agreed to give a home to Sarah and Jane until the time should come for them to be placed in a position to get their own living; and with regard to myself, a situation as under nurse-maid in a good family residing in the county was at my disposal.

"Such, my young friends," said Mr. Collins when he had gradually developed his views, "is what I propose shall be done for each and all. I know that it is a distressing thing to break up your little home and separate you from each other. But what is to be done? There is no alternative; and you must bend to necessity. Besides, it is not as if you were going to be dispersed over the world. The only one who will have to leave Ashford at all is you, Mary; and you are not to go many miles distant. You will have an occasional holiday, and an opportunity of visiting the town to see your brothers and sisters—while they will be enabled to meet frequently. Now, what do you say to my plans?"

What *could* we say? We were all gratitude, but at the same time all tears. Ah! never, never can I forget the feelings that animated me then, as I held Sarah in one arm and little Jane in the other, covering them with kisses and with tears. That breaking-up of our home to which Mr. Collins had alluded, was indeed what I had been dreading for weeks past: and it was now on the point of being consummated! But, as he said, there was no alternative; and therefore we were compelled to submit. Poor William was sadly afflicted; but Robert certainly cared much less about it than I had anticipated. I wished at the time that he could have cared more; and it was no solace to me to observe that he did not weep!

On the following day, at sunrise, we all bent our steps to the churchyard; and there we stood around our mother's grave, in the belief that we were thus performing a sacred and filial duty in visiting the hallowed spot. Oh! what would I not have given to recall the lost one from her eternal

sleep, and bring her back to us to be a guide, a protection, and a solace? Ten years of my life—aye, twenty—thirty—all, all, so that I might restore a parent to those little orphan sisters whose hands I held by the side of the mound beneath which our mother slept. But all such fancies were visionary and vain. I knew it—I felt it—and with streaming eyes I led my little sisters back to the cottage, my two brothers following at a short distance.

Next morning we were separated. Sarah and Jane were taken by Mr. Collins to the house of Mrs. Whitfield, the lady who had consented to receive them. Sarah was not so much affected as I fancied she would have been. The novelty of the proceeding had its charm for her young and inexperienced mind; and she was moreover dressed in a manner that flattered her little vanity. Heavens! to be thus pleased at wearing *mourning*—Oh! how little and how meanly it made me think of human nature! As for poor Jane, she clung to me in such an affectionate manner that it almost broke my heart to tear myself away. But at length we separated; and when my two sisters were thus taken from me, I felt as if a sudden gulf had opened at my feet to separate me for ever from all possible happiness in this world.

That same afternoon I parted also from Robert and William. They accompanied me to the place whence the van started for the neighbouring town of Wye, which was my destination; and I could not help noticing, even amidst the poignancy of my own grief, that Robert shed but few tears while William sobbed as if his heart would break.

CHAPTER IV.

MY FIRST PLACE.

The residence of Mr. and Mrs. Twisden was situated about half a mile from Wye. It was a neat country-house, with a paddock, orchard, and large gardens; and though not spacious, possessed every requisite for ease and comfort.

It was between three and four o'clock in the afternoon of a cold October day, in the year 1826, that I reached Twisden Lodge, as the place was called: and passing round to the kitchen-entrance, I informed the servants who I was. There were a cook, footman, groom, housemaid, and upper-nurse; and they all received me with kindness enough. Having paid and dismissed the man who brought my box for me from Wye, I was shown up to the little bed-room that was to be my own. Thence I was introduced to the nursery, where I found that there were three children—a boy of ten, a girl of about six, and a baby of one year. By the time I had made these acquaintances, Mr. and Mrs. Twisden returned from a drive which they had been taking in the carriage; and soon afterwards I received a message directing me to go down to the drawing-room.

It was with a fluttering heart, caused by excessive timidity, that I obeyed this summons; and on entering the drawing-room, I was not much cheered on observing at the first glance that Mrs. Twisden was a cross-looking, sharp-eyed, vixenish lady, whose real disposition could not possibly be mistaken even by an observer so inexperienced as I was at the time. She was about thirty-two years of age—most gaily, indeed gaudily dressed, and wore a profusion of jewellery. On the other hand, the aspect of her husband was as benevolent and encouraging as hers was sour and disagreeable. He was at least double her age, with a bald head, white hair, a red jolly-looking face, and a stout person. He was dressed quite plainly, wore brown knee-breeches and gaiters, and looked like a gentleman-farmer. Such indeed he had been, but for some years past had given up the farm to a grown-up son by a former marriage, and was now living on his little estate, upon the fruits of his industry.

"You are the young woman that Mr. Collins so strongly recommended?" said Mrs. Twisden, fixing her eyes upon me as if she were looking out for any stories that she thought I might perhaps tell her.

"Yes, ma'am," I answered, with a curtsey; "and I am very much obliged to you for taking such compassion upon me:"—but here I stopped short and burst into a flood of tears.

"Come, come—this is silly, child," said Mrs. Twisden, rather too sharply I thought, considering that she might have known I could not help it.

"Don't be cross to the poor girl, my dear," said her husband, though evidently speaking in a manner as if he were afraid of her.

"Please to hold your tongue, Mr. Twisden," the lady immediately retorted, accompanying her words with a quick gesture and a very sharp look. "You know well enough that the management of the household devolves upon me, and I must beg you not to interfere."

"But, my dear," said her husband, in a tone of remonstrance, "I only——"

"Enough, Mr. Twisden!" interrupted the lady curtly. "We will not argue the point, if you please:" then turning her eyes quickly back again upon me, she asked, "How old are you, young woman?"

"Nearly sixteen, ma'am," was my reply.

"Not a young woman at all, then—a mere girl," said Mr. Twisden.

"I beg you will not interrupt us," retorted his wife. "And your name?" she demanded of me. "I have forgotten what Mr. Collins said it was."

"Mary Price, please ma'am," I answered.

"Nearly all nursery-maids are called Mary, I declare," exclaimed Mr. Twisden in a good-humoured manner.

"Pray keep your observations to yourself," said Mrs. Twisden, looking so prim and demure that one would have thought her husband had committed some unpardonable oversight.

"My dear, I did but jest," he said in a deprecating manner.

"But you should never jest, Mr. Twisden, in presence of your inferiors:"—then again fixing her sharp, restless, penetrating eyes upon me, she said, "Of course, Mary, you are aware of the arrangement I made with Mr. Collins concerning you? You will have to be up in the nursery altogether: and mind, you have no business down in the servants' hall or kitchen whatsoever. I do not allow gossipping—and I must warn you against giggling and whispering. As for followers, I will

not have them at all. When you want to see your relations you must go to them: I will not have them coming here to run after you. Do you understand me?"

I did indeed understand that the lady was giving me a great many unnecessary cautions, and in a tone and manner, too, just as if I had already committed some of the faults against which she was warning me—or as if she had previously heard that I was a person very likely to fall into those errors. In fact, her language cut me to the quick: for I had come to the house with the determination to do my very best, and I already felt a presentiment that nothing would give this lady satisfaction. However, I subdued my feelings with a great effort, and murmured a faint "Yes," in answer to her question "whether I understood her?"

"You see she is very timid and bashful, poor thing," said Mr. Twisden, again putting in a word in my favour.

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Twisden!" at once retorted the lady, in a peremptory tone. "The stillest water is sometimes the deepest. Not that I mean to say anything against this girl here. At all events we shall give her a fair trial——"

"To be sure, to be sure, poor thing!" said Mr. Twisden, taking up the poker and thrusting it with some violence between the bars, as if to make a little display of determination on his own part.

"The fire does not require stirring, Mr. Twisden," immediately exclaimed his wife. "I can't afford to let you waste the coals in this manner. And as for your saying *poor thing*, I think she is indeed very much to be pitied, to have got into such a house as this without ever having been at service before! Young woman," she continued, again fixing her eyes upon me, "you will have to take care of the baby who is really the most good-tempered——"

"The crossest," faintly murmured Mr. Twisden.

"No, sir!" ejaculated his wife, darting upon him a withering look which threatened a perfect scene so soon as I should have left the room: "baby is the dearest, sweetest, best-tempered child in the whole world if he is but treated properly. But he wants talking to, fondling, playing with, and coaxing. Of course he has got his little spirit, young as he is—and so has Miranda—and so also has Gustavus," added the lady, thus alluding to the other tenants of the nursery.

I now ventured to give utterance to a few words expressive of my desire to do my best and afford satisfaction; and with tears in my eyes and a broken voice, I assured Mrs. Twisden that I had been too well brought up to have any inclination for gossipping, giggling, or idling.

"Too well brought up!" she literally screamed out in a sharp querulous voice that rang through my brain and made her husband start visibly. "For goodness' sake don't use that phrase here, young woman! We never had servants who pretended to have been respectably brought up, but they always turned out bad. One made away with the linen——You remember, Mr. Twisden? That was the tall girl you said was good-looking—although, for my part, I never could see anything but brazen impudence——"

"I am sure, my dear, your taste is better than mine," said the old gentleman, evidently in the hope of conciliating and soothing his comparatively young wife. "But really——"

"No *buts*, if you please, Mr. Twisden," she interrupted sharply: then again addressing herself to me, she said, "You will take care of little Dickey—that's the baby—and mind he does not cry. I hold you answerable for his crying. You must also look after Master Gustavus and Miss Miranda. They are dear amiable children, and can be led, but not driven. Their tempers are sweet; but they have their mother's spirit——"

Here Mr. Twisden gave a sort of low groan: then as if immediately feeling that he had committed himself, he affected to turn it off into a little fit of coughing.

"Yes—they have their mother's spirit," continued Mrs. Twisden with an emphasis so pointed that it made the old gentleman wince: "and they cannot bear to be thwarted improperly. So they must be humoured: and mind, I don't like any tales to be told out of the nursery. It affords a bad example to the children. You will always keep them neat and clean, and see that they don't run up and down stairs with dirty shoes. When it is fine you will take them out for a walk in the grounds; but not let them go on the grass to get their feet wet—nor yet into the garden to trample down the borders. You will have to keep all their clothes in order; and in fact you must devote all your spare time to needle-work. For an industrious girl there is plenty to do. As for wages, you know of course what I have agreed upon? Two shillings a-week—that is to say, eight shillings a month—for the first year: and then, if you suit, I shall not mind raising you to half-a-crown a week. So be a good girl—do your best——"

"Your very best, mind," here ventured to interpose Mr. Twisden again: and it struck me that his manner as plainly as possible conveyed the intimation that nothing but the *very best* would stand the slightest chance of pleasing his wife.

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Twisden!" she immediately said. "Don't interfere between me and my servants. I dare say this young woman and I shall get on very well together, if she will only do all I have told her. You may now retire, Mary. Go up and make friends with the little people in the nursery."

Such was my first interview with my master and mistress; and I cannot say that it was at all calculated to put me in good spirits. Mr. Twisden was evidently a kind-hearted man; but it was equally clear that he was powerless in his household. On the other hand, Mrs. Twisden had already struck me as being a lady with very little feeling. The deep mourning in which I was clad, must have reminded her of the misfortunes I had experienced: but yet, not one single word of compassion or sympathy had passed her lips—nothing but warnings, and cautions, and injunctions, and purely worldly subjects.

"But perhaps she fancies that I myself have no feeling?" I thought, as I sped back to the nursery. "Perhaps she supposes that the mourning drapery merely clothes my outward form, and hangs not within the sanctuary of the heart!"

I could not help reflecting also, that it was strange Mr. Collins should have procured for me a situation—and my *first* situation too—in the service of a lady of so severe, and almost despotic

a character. But then I thought to myself that very probably all ladies were alike in these respects towards their servants. Nevertheless, the idea *did* strike me that Mr. Collins might have fancied Mrs. Twisden to be kinder and more amiable than she really was. Which conjecture was true on my part, will presently appear.

I soon found that it was no easy task to follow the manifold instructions which my mistress had given me. First of all with regard to the baby, I do believe there never was such a peevish, cross, and passionate child in the whole world. There were times when I could do nothing with him: he would scream, and kick, and fight, as if he were going into fits. He would dash the cups and saucers containing his food off the table, or out of my hands. If I kissed and fondled him, he would throw himself back over my arm in such a way that his head would hang down and I feared lest his back would break. Then if I said some little scolding word to endeavour to make him tractable, he would suddenly spring up, elastic as an eel, seize hold of my cap, my neckerchief, or any part of my dress, and tear it seriously. I had him to sleep with me, and could scarcely get any rest. If during the day, when he was awake, I only set him down for a moment, he would commence such a screaming as to alarm the whole house; and as for doing any needle-work, it was totally out of the question. So much for Master Dickey, the baby!

Then Master Gustavus was the most disagreeable boy it is possible to conceive. He delighted in making hideous faces, saying rude things, and playing practical jokes of the most mischievous description. His sister Miranda was just as bad in these respects; and in addition thereto, possessed all the vixenish temper of the mother.

Indeed I soon found that I was to lead a dreadful life of it. When the baby screamed, Mrs. Twisden was constantly sending or coming up to the nursery to know "what on earth was the matter with that dear child?"—and when I declared that I could do nothing at all with the dear child, she would either send up again to say that unless I could manage to keep him quiet I was of no earthly use in the house and had better go about my business; or else she would rush up herself and overwhelm me with the most stinging, the most cruel, the most heartless reproaches. I will just give a specimen of the language used on these occasions.

"Mary, what *are* you doing to that child? Nothing! Don't tell me *that*: it is false! You *must* have been doing something to him. He would not cry like that unless you had hurt him. I am afraid you ill-treat him. You have been beating, or pinching, or shaking him. Don't tell me it's his temper! He's the sweetest temper in existence if petted and fondled. Well, you say he has torn your cap to pieces? So he will if you don't make him good. The poor little darling! see how he is sobbing! I know you *must* have hurt him dreadfully. This can't continue. I see very well that you are not fond of children. You are not fit for the nursery. Indeed, I don't know what you *are* fit for. You are certainly not worth your salt here; and if you don't go on better I shall give you warning at the end of the month. Come now, don't sit whimpering there! I hate crocodile's tears. Do your duty, and don't ill-treat the dear child as you have been doing ever since you first set foot into the house. It is positively shameful! I dare say if I strip the little darling I should find him all black and blue,—a perfect mass of bruises! Now, Miss, none of your impudence! How dare you say that you will with pleasure undress the child and prove that there is not a mark upon him? I know that there *is!* He is covered with marks: but I could not bear to look at them—so I won't have him undressed at all. What! for *your* justification? Who ever heard of a servant's justification? Upon my word things are coming to a pretty pass! I suppose you will be telling me I hurt your feelings next? What! You have not deserved this? You insolent slut—you impertinent hussey—don't answer me again, or I will turn you away at once without a character."

Then, having delivered herself of these tirades, Mrs. Twisden would fling out of the nursery, leaving the door wide open, and perhaps continue her unlady-like abuse all down stairs till she reached the drawing-room, the door of which she would bang behind her with a violence that shook the whole house.

My readers can already judge pretty well of what I had to put up with. But I have not told them near all. Unless I kept the baby constantly on my lap or walked about with him in my arms—for he was a very backward child and could not stand on his own legs yet—I was sure to see him go into those screaming fits which brought his mamma up-stairs and led to such dreadful scenes that they well nigh drove me to despair. And yet on the other hand I was expected to keep the children's clothes in good order. Indeed, the upper-nurse would do nothing but lounge all day before the fire. Thus all the care and all the blame fell upon me. When the baby slept I did my best with the needle: but these intervals were not long enough to enable me to keep the linen in proper repair;—and as for my own clothes, I never could find a moment to put a stitch into them. Once I sat up half the night mending the children's linen: but the gardener who saw the light through the window, told Mrs Twisden, and she gave me such a scolding that made me ill for a week afterwards.

She declared that I was an idle, worthless, good-for-nothing, deceitful hussey, who sat up at night no doubt for the purpose of reading some trumpery novel, or of writing love-nonsense to some loose fellow. Ah! if I had been of an evil-disposed character, would she not have put these things into my head and thus have prepared the way for me to do them? But I have always noticed that mistresses say anything that comes into their head when they are in a passion, without caring how cruel and undeserved may be the blow, or how demoralizing may be its influence.

When I took the children out to walk, it was utterly impossible to make Master Gustavus and Miss Miranda do a single thing that I told them. They would persist not only in running over the damp grass, but would actually roll upon it: or, escaping from me, they would get into the garden and do more damage to the borders in a single half-hour than a whole host of the most frolicsome cats could possibly accomplish in a day. All the blame of these freaks fell upon me. I was told

that I neglected the children—that I let them run wild where they liked—and that it was quite evident I did not care one fig about keeping my place. If driven almost to desperation by these taunts, I exercised some little severity towards Master Gustavus and Miss Miranda, they would start off together, go boldly into their mamma's presence, and with the most unblushing effrontery accuse me of having beaten and pinched them so that they could not bear it. Vainly might I protest that I had certainly spoken sharply, but that not for worlds would I inflict personal chastisement on them. Again would pour forth the usual volley of "impudent hussies, false jades, deceitful creatures, lying minxes, and good-for-nothing trulls," in which style of language Mrs. Twisden was such an adept. But sometimes she would assume quite a tragic air and address me in language so high-flown and with a demeanour so majestic that I used to be fearful she was taking leave of her senses—until, getting accustomed to her, I found that *this* was one of the moods into which her passion hurried her: and I noticed that when she did give way to this particular mood (which was not very often) she would check herself suddenly and then look ashamed and confused for nearly a minute.

Nothing could be more miserable than the existence which I led at Twisden Lodge. It was one incessant state of nervous excitement from morning to night. I felt that I was submitting to the process of being killed by inches for the sake of the little food I ate and of two shillings a-week! But yet I resolved to endure it all as well as I could; for I knew not whether I should obtain another situation if I left this, nor whether I could leave this at all without damaging myself in the estimation of Mr. Collins. Besides, that dreadful threat of *being dismissed without a character* ever rang in my ears; for it was a threat which Mrs. Twisden not only launched against me, but likewise at each of her other servants in their turn. Not that she ever ventured to be half so violent or half so abusive to *them* as she was to *me*: but then they were men and women of mature years, knowing the world well, and not at a loss how to get other situations;—whereas I was a poor, friendless, orphan girl of sixteen—and Oh! it was so easy for Mrs. Twisden to trample upon *me!*

Often and often did I think of writing to Mr. Collins and telling him exactly how I was situated and all that took place: but my courage failed me every time I took up the pen. Thus months passed away—the only gleam of happiness I experienced during the interval being shed upon my melancholy existence by the occasional letters I received from Robert, William, and Sarah — though Robert's letters were few and laconic in comparison with dear William's, which were frequent and lengthy.

One day—it was in the beginning of June—I was sitting unhappy enough in the nursery, the baby having just fallen asleep, when I received a message ordering me to go down to the drawing-room, as Mr. Collins was there, and wanted to see me. This announcement sent a perfect thrill of happiness through my entire frame; and I felt that my looks were brightening up all in a moment. To the drawing-room I accordingly sped; and on entering, I found the worthy surgeon seated at lunch with Mr. and Mrs. Twisden. But to my surprise — and surprised I indeed was, as my readers may well suppose — Mrs. Twisden was looking so amiable, so kind, and indeed so benevolent, that I scarcely knew her for the same lady: and for the moment I could not believe it possible that a vinegar aspect could be so completely thrown off and succeeded by the sunniest smiles.

"Here is Mary!" she exclaimed, the moment I made my appearance: then as I stood transfixed with astonishment at her altered looks and voice, she said in the kindest accents, "Come forward, my dear girl. Here is your worthy benefactor, Mr. Collins, come to inquire after you; and I have been telling him how happy you are with those dear children up in the nursery, and what romps you have together——"

"And yet," said Mr. Collins, "she does not look quite so well as she did. You have grown taller, Mary," he continued, addressing himself to me: "but you look thinner, and you have lost what little colour you ever had——"

"Why, all that happens with young people who are growing," exclaimed Mrs. Twisden, with so merry a laugh that it was no wonder if Mr. Collins took her for the most good-humoured lady in existence.

"Well, I suppose it is as you say," he observed. "At all events I am glad to hear you are happy, Mary. William, I can assure you, is getting on famously: he gives me the utmost satisfaction. A nicer nor a steadier boy I never knew."

"Oh! I am so pleased to hear these tidings," I exclaimed, with a gush of such warm and tender emotions pouring into the heart that my eyes filled with tears. "And my dear sisters?" I asked.

"Both happy and comfortable," replied the surgeon. "Sarah is growing fast, and little Jane is as chubby and round-faced as ever. Sarah is a *leetle* too self-willed and spirited, and does not seem sufficiently to understand her dependent position: but all this will wear off no doubt. She is young now——"

"And Robert, sir?" I asked: but at the same instant a cloud lowered visibly upon Mr. Collins' features, and a sad misgiving struck to my very heart's core.

"Robert *might* be steadier," he hastened to observe, perceiving that his altering looks had suddenly changed mine. "Indeed, I wish you would write to him, Mary, and tell him that I have complained to you concerning his conduct—or rather that I have echoed in your hearing the complaints which his master Mr. Matthews has more than once made to me. For a young lad over eighteen he certainly ought to know better—particularly considering the exemplary manner in which he was brought up. I am sorry to afflict you, Mary, by saying anything unpleasant: but I should not be doing my duty unless I told you the truth in respect to your eldest brother."

"I hope, sir—most sincerely hope," were the words which fell tremulously from my lips, "that Robert has done nothing wrong—nothing to forfeit your good opinion and that of Mr. Matthews, beyond redemption?"

"No, no—I do not say *that*," exclaimed Mr. Collins. "He has done nothing positively detrimental to his character: but he goes the proper way to do so. In a word, he steals off from his work, gets to the ale-house, and has even been seen playing at dice and cards with some very bad characters. So you

must write to him, Mary—tell him what I say, and conjure him to reform his conduct while it is yet time."

"I am sure that Mary will write her brother a very proper letter," said Mrs. Twisden; "and if a good girl ought to make a good brother, then should Robert Price assuredly profit by his sister's example."

"Yes, yes—she is a very good girl," now chimed in old Mr. Twisden; "and as pretty as she is good."

I coloured up to the eyes at these words: yet even in the midst of my confusion I could not help noticing that Mrs. Twisden suddenly threw a perfectly fiendish look upon her husband. But instantaneously relapsing into smiles again, she said in a merry tone, "O fie, Mr. Twisden! you make poor Mary blush up to the very eyes. But Mr. T. is always jocular, you know," she added, turning to Mr. Collins: "and his jocularity is of so harmless and truly good-humoured a character, it is impossible to be offended with him. He's a dear good kind husband:"—and she patted his cheek with every appearance of devoted affection.

After a little more conversation with Mr. Collins I withdrew; and on returning to the nursery, found Master Gustavus and Miss Miranda dragging the baby about the room, while the upper nurse sat fast asleep by the fire. Baby was screaming frightfully; and it took me an hour to pacify him. I then managed to obtain leisure sufficient to write a letter to Robert; and wishing it to go by that same evening's post, I went down to take it to the kitchen so that the gardener might convey it along with Mr. Twisden's letters to the receiving-box at Wye. But as I traversed the first-floor landing, my ears were assailed by the sharp querulous voice of Mrs. Twisden, who was addressing her husband in the drawing-room the door of which happened to be standing ajar.

"And so you call that jade pretty, do you, you old villain?" she cried. "I'll teach you to look at pretty girls, I will! I will tear your old eyes out of your head, if you ever dare to do it again. Pretty indeed! she is nothing but an impudent trull; and if she don't behave herself, I will pack her off bag and baggage."

"But my dear, my dear," interposed Mr. Twisden, in a voice of abject entreaty, "did you not say all you could to Mr. Collins in favour of the girl?"

"Well, to be sure I did—and what then?" shrieked forth my mistress. "One likes to appear kind and good to one's servants before one's friends; but privately I hate all servants!"

"Well, well, my dear," said her husband soothingly, "hate just what you like and whom you like: only just love *me* a little less before strangers, so that you may love me a little more when they are gone."

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Twisden!" exclaimed his lady.

But I paused to listen no longer. Indeed I even felt annoyed with myself for having stopped to listen at all; and speeding down stairs, I gave my letter to the gardener, who was just about to set off with his bag to Wye.

CHAPTER V.

ROBERT.

SEVERAL more months passed, and I continued to endure exactly the same kind of existence which I have been describing. I did not even dare ask for a holiday to go and see my brothers and sisters at Ashford; and thus a whole year and upwards had passed since we were separated. Robert had answered the letter I wrote him: but though there was nothing actually brutal in his response, I cannot say that it was affectionate towards myself or respectful in the mention he made of his employer. He said Mr. Matthews was an old grumbler whom no one could satisfy, and that Mr. Collins was so very particular he saw evil in the most innocent amusement: then he went on to say that he was my elder and that it was not seemly or becoming in me to write to him in such a reproachful style. But in conclusion, he had assured me that I need not be afraid of his bringing disgrace down on the name we bore.

Upwards of a year had passed, I say, since I first set foot at Twisden Lodge; and it was now the month of November, with its short gloomy days and its long, long wintry nights. One forenoon, when it was a little finer than the few preceding days had been, and there was a glimpse of sunshine upon the hoar frost that sheeted the trees, the roofs, and the grass with silver,—I took Master Dickey, the youngest child (for he was now called "baby" no more) out for a walk. The other two children had, for some reason which I forget, remained in-doors; and I was therefore enabled to enjoy—if enjoyment it were—the companionship of my own thoughts as I led along the little fellow who had only been able to walk within the last few months, he being a very backward child. All of a sudden, as we reached a stile leading from the paddock into the fields, I noticed that a man was seated upon the step on the other side; and as he raised his countenance I gave vent to a faint shriek on beholding my brother Robert.

"Ah! Mary, is that you?" he said in a manner that had not very much affection in it: but he nevertheless stepped over the stile and kissed me on the cheek.

His breath smelt of liquor; and on regarding him more closely, I was struck—indeed shocked—by his dissipated appearance. He was also shabby and dirty and looked as if he had been passing the previous night in debauch, or else wandering about. Altogether his appearance was but too well calculated to give me the greatest pain; and the maddening thought flashed to my mind, with the force of an inspiration, that he would not turn out well in life.

"Good heavens, Robert!" I exclaimed; "how strange you look! When did you leave Ashford? where have you been?"

"Oh! I have just come out for a spree," he replied, with the coarse accents, the bravado look, and the rakish hardihood of the youth who apes the dissipation of the man. "The old fellow—I mean Matthews—gave me a holiday for the day; and so I thought I would just tramp across and see you, since you don't come to Ashford to see us."

"My master and mistress have not been able

to spare me," I replied; "but they have promised me a holiday in a few weeks. But you do not look, Robert, as I should like to see you look," I continued with great seriousness. "In fact, you seem as if you had been out, or at least up, all night, rather than having only just walked across from Ashford."

"Oh! bother take the looks," he said with a sort of reckless bravado which made his accents go cold to my heart's core: "a 'prentice who is hard-worked and deuced badly paid—not over particularly well fed too—can't look very blooming."

"But how long have you been sitting on this stile?" I asked, fancying that he had some reason for not coming direct on to the Lodge.

"How long?" he echoed. "Oh! only a few minutes: but I thought it likely perhaps you would be walking out, and I didn't know but what you would rather have me meet you here than calling on you at the big mansion itself. Besides, I don't like coming in contact with those lace-bedizened and yellow-plushed flunkeys, who look as stately as if they meant to crush you, or as savage as if they intended to snap one's head off."

"Well," I said mournfully—for it struck me that there was something strange, unaccountable, and even suspicious in his looks, his words, and his proceeding, "you have not told me how the dear girls are, and William——"

"Oh! Bill is getting on swimmingly," he replied: "but he had the impudence to take me to task a month ago, and so I have not seen him since. As for Sarah, she is growing a deuced nice girl—full of spirit, too; and little Jane is as fat as ever."

"And are they happy?" I inquired: "for I need scarcely ask if they are well and kindly treated."

"Happy!" exclaimed Robert: "I should think they are, too—plenty to eat and drink, and nothing to do except needle-work or some such nonsense. But I say, Mary, we can't very well talk here: and perhaps you won't like to introduce me into the kitchen there,"—pointing to the Lodge—"for I know I am not quite as neat and clean as I might be. But you may manage, perhaps, to let me slip up to your own room; and there we can have a nice cozy chat together."

"Robert my dear brother," I exclaimed, bursting into tears; "how strangely altered you are! The idea of even asking me to introduce you stealthily and slily into the house! No—come round boldly, if you will, with me to the servants' hall."

"No, not this time," he answered. "I am not well togged enough. But what a nice place it is though," he continued, fixing his eyes on the Lodge. "A servants' hall, eh—and a kitchen besides?"

"Yes, to be sure," I said.

"What! and a butler's pantry and all that kind of thing?" he continued.

"Yes," I again answered. "Is it not a gentleman's house?"

"And he's very rich, I suppose, the old fellow?" said Robert, apparently in a careless manner.

"Yes, I think he is very well off," I observed.

"Oh! of course he is," exclaimed Robert. "I suppose he lives in good style—dines off silver plate every day——"

"He lives like a gentleman, as he is," was my answer.

"Many servants—eh?" inquired Robert. "Butler, I suppose?"

"No—but a footman who performs the duty of one," I replied.

"What? takes care of the wine-cellar, the plate in the pantry, and all those kind of things?" said Robert. "Ah! that's just the berth I should like: it's much better than a miserable 'prentice to an old drudge of a carpenter."

"I am sorry to find that you are not satisfied with your condition," said I. "Do you know, Robert, I have been very uneasy concerning you; and you cannot conceive all the distress of mind I experienced when I wrote that letter——"

"Well, about the letter," he exclaimed, interrupting me: "did I not answer it? did I not promise you I would be a good steady fellow? But I really cannot help admiring your master's house," he continued, with his eyes still fixed upon Twisden Lodge. "I suppose those three windows with the red curtains and the yellow fringes are the drawing-room?"—then, as I nodded assent, he added, "And I'll be bound that the windows overhead with the blue curtains just seen through, and the beautiful snow-white blinds, are the old folks' bedroom?"

"Dear me, Robert, how childishly you are talking!" I exclaimed. "Considering we have been parted so long, and might be supposed to have so much to say to each other——"

"What! do you mean that I am childish?" he asked. "If I feel interested in the place where you live, is there any harm in that?"

"Forgive me, Robert," I hastened to exclaim, my heart suddenly yearning towards him at the bare idea of his feeling interested in me, his sister, who loved him so well. "Go on, Robert—ask me any questions you like."

"Lord bless you, Mary," he said, "it is no matter to me where your master and mistress sleep, or where they don't: but just to satisfy a whim, didn't I guess right now about that upper room being their bed-chamber?"

"Yes, your conjecture is true," I responded: "and those two windows you see on the corresponding side of the building are the nursery."

"Is that where you sleep, Mary?"

"No: the top window above the portico is my room, where this little fellow and I sleep together."

"Ah! it's a nice place," observed Robert: "but lonely though—very lonely. I suppose you have plenty of bolts and bars, pistols and blunderbusses, and all those kind of things?"

"I never saw any fire-arms in the house since I have been there," was my reply: "and as for bolts and bars, I do not know that such defences are particularly in request. Of course all proper precautions are taken: but no one ever thinks of thieves and robbers in this neighbourhood. I have not heard a single syllable said upon the subject since I first came here."

"But I hope, dear Mary," said Robert, with an apparent air of concern, "that you always lock your door of a night? I'll be bound that your master and mistress take very good care to lock *their* bedroom door——"

"Indeed," I exclaimed, "I am very certain they do *not:* for when Master Dickey here has been

crying of a morning, Mrs. Twisden has suddenly rushed out of her chamber to ask what was the matter, and I have heard no bolts drawn back nor key turned in the lock."

"Well, you must know, dear Mary," observed Robert, "that if I entertain any fears it is only on your account, because the place is certainly as lonely as it well can be——However," he immediately added, "enough upon this point. I am glad I have seen you: but I wish you would not go making yourself miserable on my account, and writing me such melancholy letters. Rest assured that I shall do all that's right and turn out all that's well."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, terrified at the words he had just uttered; for it seemed as if knowing the elements of his own weakness, he was in a negative sense predicting his own ruin: "have you ever contemplated the possibility of turning out otherwise than well? Consider, my dear brother, I said," now taking his hand and pressing it affectionately, "one false step made can never be retrieved."

"That's just what old Dr. Nance said in the pulpit the other Sunday," interrupted Robert.

"Ah! then you do still go to church," I exclaimed, a sensation of joy and hope springing up within me.

"To be sure I do, Mary," replied my brother: then in a different tone, and which seemed to me to be at the time fraught with deep earnestness, he said, "I am not so bad as I know that I have been reported to you. By your letter I saw that old Collins had been telling you I frequented the alehouse, and that was one of the complaints of old Matthews——"

"Mr. Collins and Mr. Matthews," said I correctively.

"Yes—to be sure—beg pardon, Mary dear," rejoined Robert, with a momentary flippancy: but

instantly resuming a serious manner and voice, he continued thus:—"It is all very well for Mr. Matthews to go and tell tales; but sometimes on a Saturday night, when pay-hour comes, he hasn't got the money ready, so his foreman tells all the men to go round to the *Saracen's Head* tap and wait there till he comes. Well, of course they must do something; and what *can* they do but drink and smoke—and this perhaps up to eight, nine, or even ten o'clock—and as pay time is at five, several hours are so spent in drinking. Well then, if old Matthews regularly encourages this amongst his men, how can he grumble if his 'prentice just drops in to a little quiet respectable alehouse on the outskirts and takes a drop with a friend?"

"I wish to heaven, Robert, you would promise me never to go there again?"—and as I spoke I looked earnestly up into his countenance. "Now, my dear brother, you have been drinking this morning——"

"Well, just a glass of ale," he exclaimed; "and there's no harm in *that* during a five mile walk. But however, I really will bear in mind all you tell me, Mary, for you are a good girl——But I say," he suddenly exclaimed, "what dog is that barking?"—and he seemed to listen attentively.

"Dog!" I echoed. "I can hear none."

"Oh! but I did though," he immediately said: "and a good large one too! It must be about your premises."

"We have no dogs at the present moment," said I. "Mr. Reuben Twisden—that is master's son, who lives at the farm over yonder—took away our dog last week, because he barked so at night time."

"Ah! indeed," observed Robert. "Well, good bye, Mary dear: I must be off now. I promised Mr. Matthews to be home early in the evening, and I shall keep my word."

"Then you really mean," said I, "to turn over a new leaf?"

"I do, upon my word," he replied. "When you come to Ashford in a week or two, as you say you shall, you will hear quite another account of me. Come, kiss me—and now good bye."

We embraced and parted; and I hurried back to the house—for this colloquy had exceeded half-an-hour, and Master Dickey was getting sleepy and cross. But the moment I entered the hall I heard the drawing-room bell ring violently; and the footman, who had run up to answer the summons, met me on the stairs as I was ascending a minute or two afterwards, and stated that Mrs. Twisden desired to see me the moment I had taken Master Dickey up to the nursery. I instantaneously knew that something was wrong, and suspected that I had been seen in conversation with my brother: but *as he was my brother*, I fancied that I had only to mention this circumstance in order to set the matter at rest. Accordingly, having consigned the child to the care of the upper-nurse, and having taken off my bonnet and shawl, I proceeded to the drawing-room, where Mr. Twisden was lolling in an easy chair looking at the fire, and his lady was seated bolt upright in an arm-chair, as starch and prim as you please, and with her mind as well as her face evidently made up for "a scene."

"Come in, young woman—shut the door," she said, in a curt peremptory manner: then pointing towards a spy-glass which lay upon a side-table, she said with a leer of malignant mockery, "This tells tales, bringing distant objects close to view, and showing the slightest gestures of people, even at the end of the paddock."

I blushed—not through any sense of shame, because I had done no wrong; but it was with a feeling of indignation at the thought of having my actions (for I knew that she was alluding to *me*) the subject of so mean and base an espial.

"There, Mr. Twisden!" she ejaculated in a tone of triumph as she turned towards her husband: "did I not always tell you that this was as sly a puss as ever walked? But you have invariably taken her part, you have—interfering between me and my servants——"

"I am sure, my dear," began Mr. Twisden, reverentially, "I never——"

"Enough, sir!" broke in the lady with an air of majestic disdainfulness: then turning to me, while her countenance suddenly grew distorted with rage, she cried, "And now, you slut, what have you got to say for yourself—meeting a lover down there at the stile, and kissing him under the very windows of the house! Oh! you shameless wretch, what an example for that dear child of mine that you dared take with you! Mr. Twisden, sir, do you allow our child—our innocent offspring—to be thus demoralized—thus corrupted—thus contaminated?"

"Whom do you mean, my dear?" asked her husband, with quiet vacuity. "Not the baby surely?"

"Yes, sir—that innocent babe," continued Mrs. Twisden, still pursuing her heroics: "our babe, I say, who beheld this vile slut kissing some loose fellow——"

"If you please, ma'am," said I, my cheeks colouring with indignation, but my eyes gushing with tears at the same moment, "it was my brother—my eldest brother Robert—who came to see me——"

"Ah! indeed," ejaculated Mr. Twisden, suddenly starting round in his seat, and with the air of one who was unfeignedly rejoiced to find that a fellow-creature could put forth a triumphant vindication against an imputed offence.

"Yes, sir, such is the solemn truth," I added emphatically, even with vehemence: "and it was because mistress told me at the beginning that she would allow no followers of any kind, I did not persist in bringing my brother round to the servants' hall—although I certainly *did* ask him once to accompany me thither."

"Then you see, my dear," said Mr. Twisden, "the poor girl has explained her conduct——"

"Poor girl, indeed!" cried the lady, who was evidently convinced that I had spoken the truth, but had not the generosity to acknowledge that she had accused me wrongfully. "I beg you will not speak of any young woman in such a manner, Mr. Twisden, in my presence. As for explaining anything, of course there's always an excuse ready. There never was a female servant yet who had not a host of convenient brothers, and uncles, and cousins; and after all they are nearly all lovers! However, I shall look over it this time," she continued, as if suffering herself to be softened into mercy.

"But I can assure you, ma'am," said I, a suffi-

classy of spirit rising within me to make me revolt against the idea of being pardoned for nothing; "I have not done any harm. That young man was my brother, who walked over from Ashford to see me; and if you do not believe me, it is so easy to satisfy yourself, ma'am, that I am speaking the truth."

"As if I should take the trouble!" observed Mrs. Twisden, with a disdainful toss of the head.

I might have reminded her—but of course I dared not—that she had taken a great deal of trouble to endeavour to blast my character, and that as a Christian it became her to spare no pains in arriving at the truth, supposing that she still doubted it—which of course she did *not*. She had espied my movements with the telescope—she had evidently watched for the moment when I re-entered to ring the bell furiously and order me into her presence—she had even arranged herself with that magisterial primness in the arm-chair so as to make the scene all the more gratifying to her own enjoyment of petty tyranny and all the more crushing for myself: but now it was with a prideful toss of the head that she rejected anything like *trouble* in doing me justice. And how often have I seen this same devouring eagerness and gloating readiness on the part of masters and mistresses to crush poor servants to the very dust: but seldom, very seldom, would they even have given themselves the trouble to walk across the room to clear that same poor servant from suspicion!

"Well, I have told you," resumed Mrs. Twisden sharply, as if I had sought this interview and had either produced the scene or was the cause of prolonging it,—"I have told you that I will look over it this time. What more can you want? It is not every mistress who is so indulgent as I am. There, that's enough," she added, still more petulantly; for the tears were now pouring down my cheeks. "It's no use whimpering. I have before told you I don't like crocodiles' tears."

"But, my dear," interposed her husband mildly, "this young woman has proved her innocence——"

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Twisden. I do not interfere between you and your footman, or groom, and I beg that you will not interfere between me and my maids. Now, Mary, there's enough of all this. Retire to the nursery."

Though smarting bitterly under the sense of keenest wrong and cruellest outrage, yet what could I do? To venture a word of remonstrance would be to risk my place; and *that* I dared not lose, bad though it were. I accordingly hastened to withdraw: but ere the door completely closed behind me, I heard Mrs. Twisden say to her husband in a low, hissing voice, full of reptile-like malignity, "You old villain, you still take her part, do you! But beware how——"

I heard no more: for at that instant I closed the door. Nevertheless, I had heard enough to afford me an additional proof that my master took compassion upon me, and even suffered on that account from the vixenish temper of his wife.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRIP TO CANTERBURY.

A few days after the scene which I have just described, I accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Twisden in the carriage to Canterbury, which ancient city is only some seven or eight miles from Wye. Mr. Twisden had business at the banker's; and Mrs. Twisden wanted to go "shopping." The day was remarkably fine for the season of the year, the air being clear, crisp, and frosty; and therefore it was considered that it would do Master Dickey good. I of course went to take care of him,—the amiable Master Gustavus and Miss Miranda remaining at home with the upper-nurse.

On arriving at Canterbury, the carriage was put up at the *Fountain Hotel*, where lunch was also ordered to be ready by and bye. Mr. Twisden went off to his banker's; and I followed my mistress in her shopping rounds.

And here I may observe that to her other faults, which were certainly not a few, she added that of the most pinching, grasping meanness. We went into one linen-draper's shop, where she sat nearly an hour, making the assistant pull the whole place to pieces in order to show her the different goods it was her whim to inspect. For my part, patient and enduring as I am naturally and as circumstances indeed compelled me to be, I wondered at the patience and endurance of the shopman, not merely in respect to having to show so many different things when only one article in reality was required, but also on account of the airs which the lady gave herself, the imperious manner in which she ordered him about, and the style in which she took him to task when he was not quick enough for her. But there was the poor young man, as submissive, as polite, and as obliging as it was possible to be; while it appeared that in proportion as his obsequiousness grew servile and cringing, Mrs. Twisden's manner became all the more imperious and overbearing. At length, having inspected a hundred different articles, and had as many pieces of goods taken down and spread open during the hour we staid there as would take at least half a day to fold up and put in their places again, Mrs. Twisden ended by laying out exactly thirteen shillings and sixpence: and though the parcel was so very small that she might have put it into her reticule, or I could of course have carried it for her, she would insist that it should be sent to the *Fountain Hotel*,—threatening that if it were not there within an hour she would never deal at that shop again. Then, as she took her departure amidst the bowings and scrapings of the master-draper and his shopman, she received their homage just for all the world as if she felt that she was a great benefactress to the establishment and had been laying out there at least as many pounds as she had spent shillings.

We thence proceeded to three or four other shops, where my mistress behaved in just the same way, giving a vast amount of trouble, showing off her airs, and ending by purchasing next to nothing. I was really so ashamed of her proceedings that I felt as if it was I myself who was doing all that she did; and I could not help thinking that if *poor* women were to give one tithe of that trouble, they

would very soon be told that their custom was not wanted and that the shopkeepers would rather have their room than their company.

But it was not merely in giving trouble and turning the shops topsy-turvy that Mrs. Twisden displayed her bad taste: for when she had at length selected some small article, she would sit haggling about the price, beating down the shopman even for a few pence, in a manner which made the blood tingle to the very tips of my fingers, and I felt all the shame and confusion which my mistress *ought* to have experienced. I recollect, too, upon the occasion of this visit to Canterbury which I am describing, that when I thought our shopping rounds were over and we were returning to the hotel, Mrs. Twisden, who seemed to be in rather a good humour, suddenly turned to me, exclaiming, "By the by, Mary, there is a new linen draper's opened, I hear, in Mercery Lane. I must just go and have a look at it. Not that I want any thing: but it is as well just to see——"

Here she mumbled something to herself, so that I lost the remainder of the sentence; and on she sped to the new draper's, I closely following, dragging the great heavy child in my arms—for he was now fast asleep.

The moment we entered the establishment, one shopman *outside* the counter handed chairs, and another *inside* stood ready to receive orders. Mrs. Twisden desired him to show her some silks for dresses; and in a moment a pile of beautiful pieces was spread before her. While examining them, she took care to let the shopman know that she was Mrs. Twisden of Twisden Lodge, near Wye, and that she was accustomed to deal at Canterbury, but that she did not care with whom she dealt particularly, so long as she was well served. Of course this announcement of her name and conditional promise of patronage placed the shopman more on the alert than ever; and nothing could equal his attention. He was positively excruciating in his politeness; and for my part I felt it was quite painful to foresee that all this marvellous civility and insinuating obsequiousness would be thrown away. But my mistress experienced no such feeling. When she had inspected the silks—felt them—fingered them—pulled them to try their strength—and inquired all their prices, she asked to look at some satins. These she treated in just the same manner, looking however just for all the world as if she meant to end by at least a twenty guinea purchase. However, she gave no order for satins, but desired to be shown some velvets; and this request was instantaneously complied with. It really seemed as if a fairy wand brought down piles of costly stuffs from shelves and boxes and heaped them upon the counter. The shopman was evidently in the highest possible spirits; and from time to time I saw him fling a most encouraging and self-satisfied look towards his master, who was seated at a little high desk at the far end of the establishment, no doubt waiting to write out the heavy order which he supposed himself about to receive. I saw all the hopes that were thus inspired, and I felt as ashamed—indeed as wretched as if I had committed a crime: for I suspected how all this was about to end. Indeed, I heartily wished myself safe out of the shop. *There*, however, did my mistress remain an hour—a full hour—inspecting everything she fancied until the counter literally groaned beneath the weight of all the goods heaped upon it. At length she rose, and coolly saying, "Well, I shall call in another day," slowly stalked out of the shop. The master and his assistants were evidently astounded for the moment: but speedily recovering themselves, they bowed her out with as much politeness as if she had spent fifty guineas amongst them. It was quite a relief to me when we got out of Mercery Lane: for I scarcely conceived it possible that a lady who so ostentatiously paraded her wealth and vaunted her position, could have had an entire shop thus pulled to pieces out of sheer curiosity and then have taken her leave after all without buying so much as a yard of ribbon!

Well, we now retraced our way to the *Fountain Hotel*, which was indeed close by; and my mistress desired me to follow her into the room where the luncheon was served up. On being conducted by the waiter to that apartment, we found Mr. Twisden seated at the fire, in company with a military officer in his blue undress uniform. He was tall in stature, certainly very handsome and of elegant appearance: his age was about three or four-and-twenty—his hair and eyes were dark—his whiskers were carefully curled—and he had a moustache which, though as jetty as his hair, was nevertheless as delicately pencilled as his eyebrows.

"My dear," said Mr. Twisden, introducing the officer to his wife, "I just now fell in with an acquaintance of our's at the banker's. This is Sir Aubrey Clavering, Major in command of His Majesty's ——— regiment of infantry stationed at the barracks of this city."

"I believe that I had the honour," said the young baronet—for such he was—"of seeing Mrs. Twisden at Dover three or four years ago. I was then comparatively a boy," he added, with a certain tinge of affectation in his voice and manner as he twirled his moustache.

"I perfectly recollect," said Mrs. Twisden, now assuming all that amiability which she could put on to suit particular occasions. "You were then a lieutenant in your regiment, Sir Aubrey, if I mistake not? And now——"

"Now you see, my dear, he is a *Major*, although but little better than still a *minor* in years:"—and Mr. Twisden laughed so heartily at his wretched joke that he grew quite purple in the face.

"Always jocular and good-natured, you see, Sir Aubrey," said Mrs. Twisden, flinging towards her husband a look which a casual observer might suppose to be fraught with the sweetest amiability, but which was really penetrated with a certain electric warning that he had better mind and not make a fool of himself.

"I can assure you, madam," said the Baronet, "that I was quite charmed to meet with your excellent husband again. He insisted upon bringing me hither to lunch; and he has followed up his kindness by inviting me to visit Twisden Lodge——"

"I am sure," interrupted the lady, with the most mellifluous urbanity, "nothing will give us greater pleasure than to receive you at the Lodge. Indeed, before we take our leave to-day, Mr. Twisden must get from you a settled promise as to when you will come."

"To be sure—and the sooner the better," observed my master, evidently rejoiced to think that

the invitation he had thus given, for a wonder experienced his wife's approval. "Come, name your own day, Clavering, and bring any of your friends you like. What say you to Monday next?"

"I shall be entirely at your service," replied Sir Aubrey: then advancing towards the corner in which I had seated myself with Master Dickey on my lap, he said in a tone of assumed admiration, "What a lovely little creature! I never saw such a fine fellow in all my life. I suppose he is the youngest—eh?"

And he patted the cheeks of the child, who I am bound for truth's sake to declare was decidedly the ugliest and most repulsive-looking infant I ever saw.

"Yes, that is the youngest," exclaimed Mrs. Twisden, in an ecstacy of delight at the compliments lavished on Master Dickey. "Don't you think he is uncommonly like his pa?"

"Well, I really think he is," answered the officer, as he stood in front of where I was seated, apparently contemplating the child, but in reality with his eyes fixed upon my face in such a manner that I felt myself turning the colour of scarlet and trembling all over with confusion. "He is indeed a splendid little fellow," added Sir Aubrey: and as he again patted the child's cheek, he gave me a squeeze of the hand.

I drew my hand away with such abruptness and gave such a start of indignation that the child awoke and began setting up so terrific a screaming that Sir Aubrey retreated in dismay to the fireside, exclaiming, "I am afraid I have done something wrong: but I hope to be forgiven."

I could not help seeing that while he apparently alluded to the fact of disturbing the child, as indeed Mr. and Mrs. Twisden took his meaning to be, he was in reality conveying a sort of apology to me for his rudeness, so as to disarm me of that resentment which might induce me to tell my mistress what had happened. But of course it was an incident which I dared not mention to such a woman as Mrs. Twisden, who was the last in the world to give a poor servant-girl credit for good intentions or virtuous notions.

It was some time before I could manage to pacify Master Dickey; and this was only done by giving him a large tart from a dish of sweets upon the side-board.

Mr. and Mrs. Twisden and Sir Aubrey Clavering now sat down to lunch; and of the conversation which took place I must record the following portion.

"Let me see," said Mr. Twisden, as he held a glass of brown sherry between his eyes and the light of the window, "it must be five years since I saw you, Clavering, at Dover. Ah! you little thought then that you were destined one day to succeed to the title and estates which you now possess."

"No—assuredly, such an event was not within the range of prophecy," observed the Baronet. "My deceased cousin, being in the prime of life and full of vigorous health, seemed destined to live to a good old age; and though he had remained so long unmarried, yet it was not to be expected that he meant to continue in single blessedness all his life. At all events, it was not for *my* sake that he would have remained unmarried: he had no particular fondness for me, so as to make him wish to leave me his heir, as indeed I was in law so long as he remained childless."

"And his death," observed Mr. Twisden,—"do you think it was accidental, or suicide?"

"Accidental, no doubt!" exclaimed Sir Aubrey. "What earthly reason had he to commit suicide?"

"It was not by violence, then, that he perished?" asked Mr. Twisden. "No foul play was suspected?"

"No," rejoined the Baronet: "I don't think such an idea struck anybody. But the fact is that the corpse, when found, was so shockingly decomposed and so disfigured—indeed, half eaten by the fish—that if it had not been for the watch and seals which remained in his fob, and a signet-ring which he always earried in his purse, it would have been by no means easy to have proved the identity of my poor cousin's body."

"We were much shocked on reading the account in the papers when it took place," said Mrs. Twisden. "Not that we had any particular acquaintance with the late Sir Wyndham Clavering: indeed we had not very often seen him—only at County Balls, Canterbury Races, and on such-like occasions."

"You remember, my dear, we saw him at Dover," said Mr. Twisden, "when we first had the pleasure of forming the acquaintance of Sir Aubrey—then plain Lieutenant Clavering," added my master with a smile.

"To be sure, we saw Sir Wyndham then!" ejaculated Mrs. Twisden. "And now, Sir Aubrey," she continued, also with a smile, "I hope *you* do not mean to follow the example of your late cousin and let all the best years of your life slip by without seeking the blessings of matrimony?"

Here Mr. Twisden gave a sort of subdued groan, and appeared to writhe for a moment uneasily on his chair.

"Is anything the matter with you, my dear?" asked his lady, with well assumed tenderness of tone, but with a quick flash of lightning-menace in her looks. "I am afraid this partridge-pie is disagreeing with you?"

"No, my dear—it is not the pie exactly," stammered Mr. Twisden, with an indescribably comical expression of misery upon his countenance. "But you were recommending our young friend here to marry soon. Now I—I—should advise——"

And then the old gentleman mumbled something about "evil day" and "as long as possible," so that Sir Aubrey Clavering certainly stared in astonishment, and Mrs. Twisden looked daggers at her unfortunate husband.

"He's only joking," she exclaimed, with a laugh into which she endeavoured to throw as much jocularity as possible, but which was painfully hysterical in its mockery of mirthfulness. "You see, Sir Aubrey, Mr. T. has had such happy experience of the joys of matrimony, that when death deprived him of his first spouse, he was fain to take a second."

"And I am convinced, madam," said the Baronet, who doubtless saw that the conversation had taken a disagreeable turn for his host and hostess, "my friend Mr. Twisden must account himself the possessor of a treasure in yourself. Now, Twisden," he added quickly, in order to give a turn to the discourse, "I shall accept your kind invitation for next Monday, and shall come with bag and bag-

gage ready to pass a week with you. Perhaps I shall even bring a friend, according to the permission I have received."

The conversation thereupon flowed into a new channel: but I need now chronicle no more of it. When lunch was over, I was allowed to partake of what I chose at a side-table: but I could not help observing that Sir Aubrey Clavering frequently fixed his eyes upon me in a manner that I did not like, and which covered me with confusion. Indeed, I felt very glad when the carriage was ordered. Of course Sir Aubrey handed Mrs. Twisden in; and then he assisted me to enter, observing "Take care: it is awkward to ascend with that fine heavy fellow in your arms."

This was no doubt deemed by him a necessary excuse for his condescension in helping a poor servant-girl in such a manner: but while he did thus assist me, he again squeezed my hand, as he had previously done in the room. Again also did I withdraw it so abruptly as to make him aware that to the extent of my power I resented the liberty he thus dared to take.

The carriage rolled away; and during the ride back to Twisden Lodge the lady did nothing but address her husband in the sharpest and most provoking manner, doubtless to avenge herself for what he had said respecting matrimonial matters to Sir Aubrey Clavering.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ALARMING ADVENTURE.

As Mr. and Mrs. Twisden were somewhat fatigued with their day's trip to Canterbury, they retired to rest about half-an-hour earlier than usual. Indeed, it was shortly after ten o'clock when the entire household had withdrawn for the night; and as I also was much wearied with having had to drag a heavy child about the streets of Canterbury, I saw with much pleasure that the little fellow was in a sleep so profound that it promised to last. Accordingly, I lay down in the expectation of enjoying a good night's rest; and a very few minutes after my head touched the pillow, sleep fell upon my eyes.

I knew not how long I had thus slumbered; but suddenly was I awakened by loud cries sounding through the house. I started up in bed trembling all over—a cold perspiration bathing me from head to foot, and my heart beating so loud that it seemed like a closed hand thumping at the bed's head. With suspended breath I listened. The cry of "Thieves!" which had previously rung in my ears, was continued. Both my master and mistress were giving vent to those cries; and in a few moments I heard the footman and coachman, who both slept at the top of the house, calling out that they were coming. Then there was the rush of feet in the passages and down the stairs; and my fears were increasing to a degree of excruciation I cared not move—I could not, even if I had dared; for the room was pitch dark, and a thousand vague fears were gaining upon me.

In a few moments I heard a sweeping kind of noise, as if some one was stealing along the passage, his clothes brushing against the wall: and the next moment the sound stopped at my door! The blood curdled in my veins—a fearful consternation seized upon me. I heard some one trying the handle; and as I never locked the door, there was no hindrance to its being opened. Opened then, it was—and somebody stole in. I heard him as plainly as possible: I also heard the door shut again and then locked;—but I neither remembered nor heard any more, for at that instant my senses abandoned me. How long I remained in this state I know not: but as consciousness gradually returned and I slowly recollected what had taken place, I once more became the prey to an awful consternation. I felt convinced that a thief was concealed in my room—most probably under the bed. Heavens! what a cold shuddering swept through me as this conviction settled itself in my mind. There I lay for a few minutes, rigid as a corpse, but with all the faculties of my soul vividly and fearfully awake. Utter darkness still reigned in the room: it was therefore night still. Silence also now prevailed throughout the house—a silence that seemed to entomb me in its stupendous depth!

Suddenly the idea flashed across my brain that I had been labouring under the influence of a hideous night-mare. Those cries I had heard on the part of my master and mistress—those responsive assurances from the men-servants—then the rush of footsteps—and lastly the stealthy intrusion of some one into my chamber,—all might have been but the dread incidents of a vision! The longer I pondered upon this interpretation of my alarms, the more feasible did it seem. I took courage; and mustering all my energies, stepped forth from the couch. I tried the door gently and noiselessly, so as not to disturb the household, and found that it was *unlocked*. Still more encouraged, I lighted the candle; and the quick glance which I threw around, revealed not the presence of any intruder. Still farther strengthened in my belief that I had been dreaming, I looked under the bed—and no one was there. Nothing was disturbed in the little room; and extinguishing the candle, I re-sought the couch. A troubled sleep fell upon my eyes; and the terrors I had experienced were renewed in my dreams. I awoke early in the morning with a bad head-ache and feeling ill and feverish. The excitement indeed that I endured in the night, had been dreadful to a degree—so great that it was no wonder I looked pale and felt unwell. Hastily dressing myself, I took Master Dickey into the nursery; and the moment I entered, the upper nurse-maid, who was then combing Miss Miranda's hair, exclaimed, "Well, here's a pretty business!"

"What?" I cried, in mingled astonishment and terror: for it instantaneously struck me that my supposed dream might have been a positive truth after all.

"How! is it possible you slept through all that noise?" exclaimed the upper-nurse. "Well, I do envy you! As for me, I well nigh went into hysterics—particularly when it was thought that one of the thieves had concealed himself somewhere in the house."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, thus receiving at every word she uttered fresh confirmation of the leading causes of my night's alarm: "do tell me what has taken place!"

"Why, the house has been broken open and robbed," was the reply. "Ever so much plate was taken from the pantry; and the thieves were actually bold and daring enough to push their way

into master's and mistress's bed-chamber, where they had got hold of the purses and watches—when mistress awoke and began alarming the house with her cries. Then, it seems, the thieves cut and ran, flinging down the watches and purses in their alarm; but as there was no light in the room, master and mistress couldn't tell how many there were. They think, however, there were three of them. John and Thomas"—alluding to the footman and coachman—"rushed down from their own rooms and made straight for master's; and as they went along in the dark, they fancied some one brisked by them and stole up towards the top of the house. However, nothing could be done till lights were procured; and then the search was commenced down below in the first instance. The thieves had broken in at the scullery-window; and getting into the pantry, had taken all the plate that was left out dirty from last night's dinner and supper. It's lucky the rest was locked up in the iron safe, which they had evidently tried to open, but had failed in the attempt. John and Thomas called up the gardener; and they searched all about the premises—but it was quite clear that the thieves, whoever they were, had got safe off. Then came the search throughout the house; and every room was entered—except your's, by the bye: and as your door was found locked, and it was supposed you were fast asleep, master ordered you not to be disturbed for fear of frightening Dickey. Well, nobody was found; and so the idea of one of the thieves having sneaked up to the top of the house, was evidently erroneous. You may conceive that we were all in a dreadful fright, and indeed I am still all over in a tremble, so that I can scarce do Miss Miranda's hair."

The reader may suppose with what strange interest and even awful attention I listened to this narrative: but I did not interrupt it until the conclusion. Then I told the upper-nurse what had taken place, and how cruelly I had been alarmed and thrown into a state of unconsciousness. My tale confirmed the idea that one of the thieves had remained in the house; and it was of course to be supposed that when he found all quiet he succeeded in escaping thence again. While we were yet conversing, up came the housemaid with the information that the front door had been found *unlocked* and *unbolted* when she went down an hour back, although the footman well recollected having locked and bolted the door ere he retired to rest on the preceding evening. Here was another fact confirmatory of my tale; and the way in which the thief who had secreted himself in my room had after all succeeded in escaping from the house, was now fully explained.

As a matter of course the important episode connected with myself in the past night's adventure was duly communicated to Mr. and Mrs. Twisden; and when I had told my story, my master said, "Ah! poor girl, it's a great blessing for you that you were not found this morning with your throat slit from ear to ear."

"Poor girl indeed!" said Mrs. Twisden petulantly: "I think she was a very foolish girl to be so dreadfully frightened and lose her senses. Why, the thief might have carried off our dear little Dickey——"

"But, my dear," observed her husband, soothingly and deferentially, "as a matter of course the rascal only entered the room at hazard—opening perhaps the first door that his hand encountered in the dark—and as the room itself was dark——I suppose, Mary, you don't burn a light?"

"Light indeed! she would not dare," ejaculated Mrs. Twisden. "But I suppose you were going to say," she continued, addressing her husband, "that as the thief entered the room in the dark, he could not see our lovely child slumbering there? Otherwise he would have taken it away—Oh! he would have taken it away—as well as the silver forks and spoons, the fish-slice, and the butter-ladle! O dear! O dear!"—and Mrs. Twisden fell into one of those fits of heroic miseries in which she occasionally indulged, and which I have since seen enacted upon the stage.

"Come, come—compose yourself, my love," said her husband, adopting his most soothing tone, though evidently approaching her in great alarm. "I really don't think that there was any danger of our dear Dickey's having been taken off. Thieves don't often break into houses to steal children——"

"Ah! but remember, Mr. Twisden," cried the lady, suddenly recollecting a new source of alarm, "if our sweetest boy had happened to awake and cry, the thief might have murdered him—yes, murdered him!—and I shudder when I think of it!"—and again she appeared to me to be playing a part that was scarcely natural.

"Well," resumed her husband, "we must be thankful that things have ended as they have; and we can easily put up with the loss of a little plate considering that nothing worse has occurred."

"Nothing worse, Mr. Twisden!" exclaimed his lady, with a theatrical air: "when the thief was concealed in the room along with our blessed child?"

Here I fancied that the discussion was over so far as I could possibly be concerned; and not desiring to witness the altercation between my master and mistress, I withdrew. As a matter of course, precautions were now taken against a renewal of the predatory incursion which had been made: fire-arms were purchased—fresh bolts and bars were put up to the doors of the lower premises—and master's dog was got back from young Mr. Twisden at the farm. Bills were also printed at Canterbury, and posted about through the whole district, offering a reward of fifty pounds for the discovery of the burglars: but all to no effect.

On the following Monday, as I was out for a walk with the children between eleven and twelve in the forenoon, two gentlemen riding on horseback—and followed by a groom, also mounted—suddenly reined in their steeds as they reached that part of the road where I and the children were walking.

"Which is the entrance to the grounds belonging to Twisden Lodge?" demanded a voice which I immediately recognised: and looking up, I beheld, as I expected, Sir Aubrey Clavering. "Ah! it's the pretty nursery-maid, I declare!" he exclaimed.

I felt the colour rushing to my cheeks, which suddenly burnt painfully; and as my eyes glanced from the Baronet to his companion, ere they were cast upon the ground, I observed that the latter was a young gentleman of not more than eighteen or nineteen.

"Come, my pretty maid, will you answer my question?" said the Baronet: "for I know you must still be in Mrs. Twisden's service, because I recognise that *beautiful* fellow there, with the great hat and feathers:"—and he gave an ironical accentuation to the word which I have marked for italic, as if he meant to imply that he really considered Master Dickey to be the very reverse of what he denominated him.

"That gate yonder, sir," I said, "opens into the paddock in front of Twisden Lodge:"—and I was about to continue my walk with the children.

"Stop one moment," exclaimed Sir Aubrey: "don't be in such a hurry. Are these all little Twisdens? But I need not ask: they are as like as three peas—and precious ugly peas too," he added aside to his younger friend.

"Mind what you say, Clavering," observed the latter: "the poor children cannot help being ugly; and as for their nurse, she seems a very good modest kind of girl—a very genteel girl too—and it is ungenerous to detain her here against her will."

This speech, delivered in a tone of friendly remonstrance, was assuredly *not* intended to reach my ears: but I did hear it all the same—and I flung an involuntary look of gratitude upon that young gentleman who had thus spoken on my behalf.

"Well, thank you for the information you have given us, my dear," exclaimed Clavering: and putting spurs to their horses, the two gentlemen rode onward, followed by the groom, while I continued my walk with the children.

I could not help thinking of the kind manner and soft though masculine tone in which Sir Aubrey Clavering's companion had spoken. They were both in plain clothes: but it struck me that the young gentleman was most probably an officer in the same regiment; because when at the *Fountain Hotel* Mr. Twisden had desired the Baronet to bring any of his brother-officers with him when he came to visit the Lodge.

On my return to the house again, after the walk, I learnt that my conjecture was correct. The young gentleman was the Hon. Eustace Quentin, and was a Lieutenant in Sir Aubrey Clavering's regiment. I may here add that Mr. Quentin was certainly the handsomest young gentleman I had ever seen in my life. He was tall, slender, and as straight as a lance: his hair was of a rich brown, very thick, glossy, and naturally arranging itself in large wavy curls;—his eyes were of a fine hazel, large, bright, and serving as resplendent mirrors to reflect the intelligence that beamed upon his high pale forehead. His features were small—his nose straight—his upper lip short and curving with a haughty expression—and he had a brilliant set of teeth. His father was said to be a great lord, immensely rich; and the Hon. Eustace was the second son.

It may well be supposed that the arrival of such visitors at Twisden Lodge produced quite a sensation in the household. Mr. Reuben Twisden and his wife—for he was married—came from the farm to stop a few days at the Lodge, which was thus made as gay as possible. Mrs. Twisden (I mean my mistress) now came out in such gay and gaudy colours that she produced a sort of rainbow-effect as she sat in the drawing room; and it was very evident that she sought to be as amiable as she could. I kept more in-doors than ever, and even avoided as much as possible taking the children out for a walk: for I had conceived an objection, amounting almost to a fear, of standing the chance of meeting Sir Aubrey Clavering. For, every day after dinner, the children were had in to dessert; and it was my duty to take in Master Dickey and set him up in a high chair—on which occasions I could not help noticing that the Baronet surveyed me in a manner I did not like.

A week had elapsed, and I was in hope that the guests were about to take their departure—the more so as I had been promised a two days' holiday to visit my brothers and sisters at Ashford so soon as the house was quiet again. It happened that on the Monday following that of the visitors' arrival, the weather was most splendid for the time of the year. It was the beginning of December: the ground was hard as marble; but the sky was of pure and cloudless azure. The sun shone brightly; and the air was of a wholesome, healthy, and invigorating coldness—not fraught with a nipping chill. At about eleven in the forenoon Mrs. Twisden came up into the nursery; and not seeing any signs of preparation for taking the children out for a walk, she flew into a violent rage, poured forth a volley of abuse upon me, called me an idle slut, a lazy indolent worthless baggage, and ended by declaring that I was not fit *even to sweep the boards of a penny theatre!* I thought this last expression strange, but ventured on no reply at all to that or any other portion of the abuse thus heaped upon me. Indeed, I was only too glad to escape from the scene by hastening to dress the children and take them out. Threading the paddock, I took them into the main road; and was proceeding with them in the direction of the town, when all of a sudden I heard footsteps behind me. Looking back I beheld Sir Aubrey Clavering: and my annoyance and confusion were no doubt immediately depicted on my countenance.

"Hah! this is indeed an unexpected pleasure,' he exclaimed. "Lured by the beauty of the morning, I thought I would ramble forth, little expecting to have an opportunity of meeting *you*—which opportunity I have been looking for from the first moment I set foot within those walls:"—and glancing towards the Lodge, his eyes the next moment settled upon me with a peculiar expression full of a mysterious meaning.

For an instant I stood undecided how to act: but suddenly feeling the necessity of asserting the dignity of my sex—poor, humble, and obscure a member of it as I was—I said, "You can have nothing to say to me, sir, to which I can listen:"—and I hurried on with the children.

But Sir Aubrey Clavering was almost immediately by my side; and laying his hand upon my arm, he said in a low quick voice, "Mary, I beseech you to listen to me for a moment. I have something of the utmost importance to say. The truth is, you have made an impression on me, such an impression as I cannot easily describe. Pray listen to me!"

He would not have had time even to say so much as this, if I had not been stupified and dismayed for a few moments by the suddenness as well as the nature of the avowal. But speedily recovering my presence of mind, I glanced towards the children,

who were standing close by, gazing up at both of us, I said, "Here are witnesses of your conduct towards me: but they may tell the tale in a way to compromise *me*. If you have any generosity, sir, I beseech you to leave me at once."

"No, Mary—I will not—I cannot," replied the Major, passionately. "I love you—I declare solemnly that I love you——"

"Come, my dears," said I, turning hastily towards the children, "let us go back home, since this gentleman will not allow us to walk any longer:" — and seizing the children's hands, I hurried them along.

"Cruel, cruel Mary!" muttered Sir Aubrey in a deep voice. "You have no right to treat me thus: I am speaking to you respectfully and earnestly——"

"And I, sir, as respectfully and earnestly desire you to leave me," I exclaimed aloud, resolved that the two eldest children should well understand that I gave no encouragement to Sir Aubrey Clavering.

"Well, I shall find another opportunity of speaking to you," he said: and turning back, he hastily retraced his way to the Lodge.

"What did that gentleman want with you, Mary?" asked Master Gustavus.

"He is a very rude gentleman," said I, "and wished to walk with us: but your mamma will not allow us to walk with anybody—neither did I wish to walk with him."

The children soon thought of something else, and began running about as usual, getting into all kinds of mischief; so that I had my wonted work of running after them, dragging them out of hedges, picking them up when they tumbled down, and then soothing them when they cried or screamed at having hurt themselves. The walk being ended,

I was very glad to be safe in the nursery again: but I told the upper nurse-maid how rudely Sir Aubrey Clavering had behaved.

And here I would pause for a moment to advise servant-girls invariably to take the earliest opportunity of communicating to their fellow-domestics, if not to their relatives or friends, any insult or outrage they may experience from those licensed libertines of society termed "gentlemen:" because such complaint at once proves that the mind resents the treatment, and it cannot afterwards be thrown in one's teeth that encouragement was given, or that the thing was not much cared for as no complaint was made. I am well aware that in such matters complaints cannot *always* be made to the mistresses themselves; because, unfortunately, mistresses too often appear in the light of enemies rather than of friends to poor suffering female-servants: but I repeat, that prompt complaint *can* be made and *should* be made to one's fellow-servants, if one's relatives and friends be not in the same neighbourhood.

The upper nurse-maid, to whom I told my story, laughed and treated the subject lightly,—telling me that I ought to have listened to the handsome Major and asked him whether he meant to propose marriage or not: and finding that my fellow-servant treated the matter in this light, I retired to my own room to commune with myself in solitude. Nevertheless, I was satisfied in having communicated Sir Aubrey Clavering's conduct to her: because by so doing I had proved that neither had I encouraged nor did I feel flattered by it.

After the nursery-dinner, as the weather still continued remarkably fine, Mrs. Twisden ordered me to take the youngest child into the garden. Master Gustavus and Miss Miranda were going to pass the afternoon at Mr. Reuben Twisden's at the farm—for that gentleman and his lady had returned thither on the previous Saturday. Well, in the garden I accordingly rambled with Master Dickey; and as he could now run about with all ease, he played up and down the gravel walks with his toys. I gave way to my reflections. I thought of Sir Aubrey Clavering's rude conduct, and felt that I had scarcely a friend on earth to protect me against similar outrage from him or from others in future. Never did the lot of a young servant-girl appear to me more lone, more unprotected, or more miserable than on this occasion; and as I raised my looks to the pure azure heaven high over-arching this world of our's, I could not help wondering whether the spirit of my departed mother looked down from those empyrean realms and beheld what was passing below. In the grave was the shrouded slumberer—entranced deep in her wormy solitude was she entombed: but Oh! was there not an essence surviving those mortal remains and mingling with that spirit-life which belongs unto immortality? If so—and not for worlds would I believe otherwise—then doubtless the angel-eyes of my sainted mother were gazing down upon me; and though the thought melted my heart to a degree of tenderness that well nigh overpowered me, nevertheless it inspired me with hope and solace as I pondered over my position *then* and marvelled what my *future* career was to be!

But while still in this serious mood, I was suddenly startled by the sounds of footsteps approaching from behind; and as I was at that moment at the extremity of the garden farthest from the house, and in an avenue of thick branching evergreens, the suspicion which instantaneously flashed to my mind filled me with terror. Hastily I looked round: the suspicion was confirmed—and the next moment Sir Aubrey Clavering stood by my side.

"I told you, my pretty Mary," he said, "that I would find an opportunity of speaking to you again: but I did not think it would come so soon. Now, mark,—you *must* and *shall* hear me. That little brat is playing with his toys and requires no looking after; and the other ugly apes of children are not here to watch us with their great big owl's eyes. Therefore every circumstance is favourable. If you endeavour to run away from me, I will hold you fast by main force: and if you seek to cry out, I will put my hand over your pretty mouth and gag you. Now then, you see that I am resolute and determined. Hear me you shall!" he added vehemently.

"Heavens!" I exclaimed, now awakening from the paralysis of dismay and wonderment into which the passionate volubility and heated manner of his language had thrown me: "is this a gentleman—an officer—who is speaking to me, a poor defenceless girl? Sir, you have dared to use threats towards me—and let me tell you that in so doing you have played a coward's part."

"Mary, if I had not conceived a violent passion for you," he replied, in a strangely altered tone, "I should hate you for daring to use the word *coward* to me. On my soul, I love you! How can such avowal be an insult?"

"Because, sir, I am too young to hear such language at all," was my immediate answer. "But even were it otherwise, it is unbecoming to a degree that these words should be addressed by one of your rank and position to a poor humble servant-girl such as I. Sir," I added, "I do not wish to create a scene, nor make a disturbance; but if you bar my passage hence, I shall certainly cry out for assistance:"—and thus speaking, I turned abruptly and hastened towards the end of the avenue.

But in less than half a minute Sir Aubrey was at my side: one arm was thrown around my waist, and his left hand was pressed forcibly upon my mouth. Dragging me to a seat, he placed me somewhat violently there,—saying in a hoarse tone of desperate resolution, "By heaven, Mary, you *shall* listen to me!"—and as his hand fell from my mouth and his arm from my waist, he seemed to be trembling all over with the violence of passion.

Half-fainting, I had not power at the moment to cry out: my voice was stifled by the very strength of my emotions of shame, indignation, and astonishment.

"Yes, you *shall* hear me," he said, with quick and excited utterance: and I could see beyond all doubt that this was no feigned intensity of feeling on his part. "I tell you that I love you! I am rich—I will make your happiness my study—I will surround you with all comforts and luxuries—you shall have a splendid equipage, a fine house to live in, servants to wait upon you——"

"Enough, sir—enough!" I exclaimed, now suddenly recovering the faculty of speech: then as he stretched out his arms to retain me, I dashed them aside, crying, "Unhand me, sir!"—and forgetting the child, I fled towards the end of the avenue.

But fleeter far was his pace: in another minute

again was he by my side—and again too did his arm encircle my waist. A cry now broke from my lips; but he held me with a sort of maddened tenacity. I struggled violently—and yet I could not cry out so loudly as I wished. I was choking—my throat felt as if filled with ashes. At length I succeeded in again breaking away from him: again he pursued and caught me just where the avenue terminated in an open walk—and now with a wild cry of terror I sank down. The very next instant a third person appeared upon the scene. I heard the quick ejaculation of mingled wonder and anger followed by blows rapidly dealt; and the next moment I was rescued from the power of Clavering and in the arms of my deliverer.

He flew with me to the bench where Sir Aubrey had set me down so violently, but where he who now bore me, placed me so gently: and as I opened my eyes, with the long gasp of consciousness fully returning, I found that it was the Hon. Eustace Quentin who had thus so promptly and so generously stepped in to my rescue.

But before I had time to give utterance to a word expressive of my gratitude, Sir Aubrey Clavering approached, his face white with rage, his lips quivering, and his eyes flashing fire.

"Quentin," he said, in a voice hoarse with that passion which was thus betrayed by his countenance, "you will give me satisfaction for this outrage. But as I do not wish it to be known that I have been led into such a Quixotic adventure for such a Dulcinea of a nursery-maid, perhaps it would be well to observe as much silence and secrecy as possible. Of course you and I, Quentin, cannot meet as friends again at the same table—at least for the present. Therefore, leaving you the prize you have carried off,"—and here he glanced with bitter malignity towards me—"I shall at once return to Canterbury. Any excuse will do for those Twisdens to account for my abrupt departure. Perhaps you will engage the fair one,"—and again he looked towards me—"to put a seal upon her pretty lips relative to this adventure?"

Having thus spoken, with an utterance so quick that his words take three times the space to read that they did to be spoken, Sir Aubrey Clavering turned upon his heel and hastily quitted the avenue.

Covered with confusion—trembling from head to foot—not knowing what to say or what to do—yet at the time very far from comprehending what was meant by "giving satisfaction," I remained seated on the bench until Clavering had disappeared from my view: then raising my eyes timidly, I said in a tremulous voice, "Mr. Quentin, I thank you—thank you very sincerely——"

And then I could say no more, but burst into tears.

"You have nothing to thank me for," he replied, in a voice that was so kind and encouraging, at the same time so full of a manly music, that it seemed to sink down into my very heart. "I only did for you precisely what I should have done for any other female under similar circumstances. The outrage was gross—the more so because so evidently unprovoked by you."

"Believe me, sir," was my answer, "I am totally incapable of giving any encouragement to such rudeness. Though but a humble servant-girl, I have my little feelings as well as the highest and the richest."

"No doubt of it—I understand you well!" exclaimed Mr. Quentin, with an earnestness in his tone which proved that he felt what he said. "And if I mistake not," he added, slowly and hesitatingly, as if afraid of wounding those very feelings for the possession of which he gave me credit, "you were not originally brought up for this humble condition?"

"I never could have aspired to any other, sir," was my answer. "My parents were poor——"

"And yet," he exclaimed, "there is a certain air of superiority—of refinement—about you! Your conversation too—your language—your choice of words——"

"My poor mother, sir," I murmured, blushing and trembling, and the tears still chasing their way down my cheeks.

"Ah! poor girl, I understand! You had a kind good mother—and you have lost her?"—and as he thus spoke, he gazed upon me with a look so full of genuine compassion and sincere sympathy, that I felt as if it were sweet—oh! sweet indeed, to have inspired such generous feelings in the noble heart of that good youth: for goodness was marked in every lineament of his countenance, and on his forehead sat frankness and candour. "I thought from the very first that there was a certain degree of interest attached to you—I felt assured that your's was no common history," he continued. "But you shall give me an opportunity of listening to it to-morrow—that is to say, if you have no objection? I do beseech and implore you, however, to believe that I am not inspired by any feeling of idle or impertinent curiosity. No—on my soul it is far otherwise!"—then, after a few moments' hesitation, during which he continued to gaze upon me with an earnestness so full of generous sympathy that it could not offend—and it was very different from the burning looks which Sir Aubrey Clavering had been wont to fix on me—he suddenly cried, "To-morrow afternoon I return to Canterbury. In the morning, then—say at about eleven o'clock—I will be in this avenue. Perhaps you will not refuse to be here also? Do not—do not refuse, I implore you!"

Having thus spoken quickly and excitedly, he seized my hand, pressed it for a single moment in his own, and then sped away—leaving me to the strange, the wild, and the conflicting feelings which all the rapidly successive incidents for the last quarter of an hour had been so well calculated to conjure up.

But in a very few minutes I was aroused from my reverie of mixed thoughts—some being pleasurable and some painful—by the unromantic sound of Master Dickey crying ready to break his heart; and on speeding to the spot, I found that he had fallen into some prickly evergreens. Blaming myself bitterly for having for a single moment forgotten that he was left thus wandering about, I hastened to console and soothe him as well as I could: but his face, which was scratched in several places, no doubt pained him, and I had to take him into the house, screaming and roaring as he was, at the risk of bringing forth Mrs. Twisden to overwhelm me with reproaches. For-

tunately, however, she was just bidding farewell to Sir Aubrey Cavering in the drawing room; I therefore managed to get the little fellow up into the nursery without encountering his mamma: and once there, I contrived to appease him with a great slice of bread and-butter and sugar, and a quantity of cold cream on his face.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DINNER PARTY.

In the evening of this memorable day—for a memorable day in certain respects it really was, as will rather appear from the results than from what the reader already knows of the incidents themselves—a strange scene took place at Twisden Lodge. But as I did not behold it myself, I can only describe it from the manner in which it was subsequently related to me by the upper-nurse, who had it from the footman who did see it.

It appears that as the two officers had originally decided upon returning to Canterbury on the following day, a grand dinner-party was to wind up the week's gaieties at the Lodge. Sumptuous preparations had been made for the banquet; and there can be no doubt that Mrs. Twisden intended to astonish not only Sir Aubrey Clavering and the Hon. Eustace Quentin, but also the numerous guests whom she had invited. It was assuredly then some source of vexation to her that the Baronet should have taken his departure so abruptly: but it is equally probable that Mrs. Twisden managed to console herself with the circumstance that Mr. Quentin remained, and that all the surrounding aristocracy and gentry had accepted the invitation to the festival.

I am sure that a mint of money must have been expended on that occasion. Hampers came down from London, containing such delicacies and luxuries that the very names of them were previously unknown to every servant in the establishment, and most likely to the master and mistress also. The celebrated Gunter, who, we were told, was a famous "cook," also came from London to superintend the banquet; and my fellow-servants were not a little surprised to find that he had actually travelled post, *in his own carriage!* He came with a double knock at the door—was dressed as fine as a gentleman—and evidently expected to be called "sir." On going into the kitchen, he soon made the cook feel that she had suddenly become reduced to the grade of a mere scullion. He found fault with everything she had already done, and every preparation made was *wrong;* but in an incredibly short space of time he put them all *right.* Having arrived late, and turning everything topsy-turvy as he did, there was a great deal to do; but he had it all done in excellent time, inspiring everybody with his own activity.

The footman and Mrs. Twisden herself had laid the table in the dining-room, and got everything in what they considered apple-pie order by three o'clock, although the banquet was not to take place till five. At about twenty minutes to that hour, Mr. Gunter, having put things in the kitchen to rights, went up into the dining-room to put *that* to rights also; and he coolly ordered every article of plate and glass to be taken off the table that he might lay it all over again. The footman was in dismay and hastened to fetch Mrs. Twisden. She protested vehemently against any alteration, declaring that the table was laid out under her own superintendence and according to her own taste.

"Very well then, ma'am," said Mr. Gunter coolly. "Order out my horses, and I will take myself back to London. I am no use here."

Mrs Twisden attempted to give herself airs: but Mr. Gunter deliberately put on his hat and was walking away, when she begged pardon for her impetuosity and had recourse to coaxing and cajolery. He accordingly stayed—pulled the table to pieces—had it arranged in his own fashion—and compelled Mrs. Twisden to confess that the improvement *was* striking.

The guests had already begun to arrive—the yard was full of carriages—and the stables were thronged with horses. There was Sir Buffer Buff, the High Sheriff of the county—Sir Timely Ratall, one of the County Members—Dr. Simony, the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral—Mr. Gripely Holdfast, the eminent attorney of Canterbury—Sir Jukes Skimply, the Hon. Mr. Pennyfeather, and a dozen more squires and great landowners having "seats" in the neighbourhood, and all accompanied by their wives and daughters. Altogether, about forty guests sat down to the splendid banquet: and never had Mrs. Twisden appeared so amiable. It was no doubt an immense relief for her husband to contemplate the interval of several hours' liberty and license which were now before him; and the old gentleman, as I understood afterwards, was certainly as gay and as merry as he might well be under such auspicious circumstances.

The banquet passed off admirably; and when the dessert was placed upon the table the best possible humour seemed to prevail. It was while the first attack on the fruit was being made, and before the ladies had retired to the drawing-room, that the footman entered and whispered something to Mr. Twisden, who at once said, also in a low tone, "You must ask your mistress." The footman accordingly passed round the room, to behind Mrs. Twisden's chair, and whispered in her ear; but she shook her head, and said, "Impossible! not to-night." The footman then withdrew. But in a few minutes he came back again, evidently to bring some fresh message, and doing so with considerable reluctance—most likely through fear of his mistress's temper.

"Well, John, what is it now?" she asked with some little degree of petulance: then having received the whispered message, she continued aloud, "Well, Mr. Twisden, there's been so much whispering and coming in and going out during the last ten minutes, that our friends must be curious to know what it can all mean; and therefore I shall explain it. The fact is," she continued, casting her eyes around the table with a most amiable look, so as to embrace the whole company at once in that beneficent survey, "here is poor Mr. Trips, the comic actor——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Buffer Buff: "the one who has been delighting us all so much at Canterbury theatre for the last three months?"

"The same," answered Mrs. Twisden: "although,

to tell you the truth, I have not been once to see him. The fact is," she continued, in rather a serious tone, "I do not go out of my way to patronize the stage. I am not quite clear that it inculcates sound morality—and morals, you know, Sir Buffer, above all things, particularly for the lower orders."

"Oh! yes—for the lower orders indeed! They are such a dreadful drunken depraved set," he added, refilling his glass with the fine old Port. "But pray proceed, madam. What about poor Trips?"

"I am informed," continued Mrs. Twisden, "that it is Mr. Trips' benefit—or, as he calls it, his *bespeak*—next Monday night: that is to say, this day week—and he has hired a fly at his own expense to go round to all the nobility and gentry to solicit their patronage on the occasion. The Lodge happens to be pretty nearly the last in his rounds—and hence his coming so late: but he now earnestly begs and implores that I will grant him an interview for a few minutes—as if not, it will compel him to take another fly and come out to-morrow again at an expense which, I need scarcely tell you, the poor man can very ill afford."

"And therefore, my dear madam," exclaimed Sir Buffer, "you, in your sublime charity, were well disposed to see this poor man, even though it might take you away from your guests for afew minutes? Now, as I was not at home to-day when he called at Buffer Park—as I hear he did—I should like to see him myself."

"And I also," said Sir Timely Ratall: "for I was out when he called—and I will cheefully patronize the poor fellow."

"By all means! by all means!" exclaimed several voices, the good wine having opened the hearts of many who during the cooler moments of the day would have given a stern refusal to the poor actor's prayer.

"Well, I cannot oppose your benevolent intentions," said the Very Reverend Dr. Simony: "but at the same time I cannot encourage them. I hold with our amiable hostess that the stage is fraught with corrupting influences for the lower orders. But again, I say, I offer no objection?"

"Then what shall we do, my dear?" asked Mr. Twisden. "Shall we have the poor fellow in and let him take down the names of those who will patronize his bespeak?"

"It will perhaps be the best plan, under circumstances," resumed the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral. "But permit me to suggest that our amiable and excellent hostess, who entertains such elevated notions of true religion and morality, should address a few appropriate observations to this unfortunate man, who, as I conceive, is pursuing a calling that cannot be called godly."

"I will assuredly take that duty upon myself," said Mrs. Twisden, evidently much flattered by the compliment implied; then turning to the footman, she said, "John, tell Mr. Trips to walk in."

The footman accordingly withdrew, and in a few minutes re-appeared, ushering in the comic actor. And a very comical figure did Mr. Trips cut: for he wore a white great coat buttoned across his chest, a great handkerchief concealing all the lower part of his face and coming up to his nose, and a theatrical scratch-wig together with a pair of false whiskers, most likely to make himself look smart. But there can be no doubt that Mr. Trips, during his rounds since the morning, had been hospitably treated at some places where he had called, and had stopped to refresh himself at a great many alehouses along the road. The consequence was that the comic acts, in addition to his natural humour, had all the artificial comicality which semi-intoxication frequently imparts; and as his scratch-wig had got all awry and drawn over his forehead, and he had a certain roll in his gait, he looked very singular indeed as he staggered in and endeavoured to seem sober while making his bow. The footman who had not previously perceived Mr. Trip's condition of ebriety, thought it prudent, now that he *did* notice it, to stand close by and thus be prepared for any emergency that might arise.

Mr. Twisden looked very hard at Mr. Trips the moment he entered the room: but he kept bowing and scraping in such a manner that it was impossible for any one to obtain an accurate view of his countenance, two-thirds of which were concealed by the handkerchief and the wig.

"Well, Mr. Trips," said the lady, now glancing in a self-satisfied manner around, as much as to bid the company observe what an excellent moral and pathetic address she was about to deliver,—"you are invited into the presence of myself, my husband, and our distinguished guests, in order that we may do for you, through benevolence, that which we might not perhaps be inclined to do if your profession as an actor were alone taken into consideration. For few of us here present, and myself perhaps as little as any, would—if it depended on us—permit a single theatre to open its doors except to receive that high and distinguished class which——"

"Well, I'll be hanged if this don't beat cock-fighting!" suddenly exclaimed the comical Mr. Trips: and at the same moment twisting himself into the attitude of a clown, with his knees turned out angularly, his hands resting upon them, his elbows likewise protruded, and his body leant forward, he said, "Come, Betsy! if you feathered your nest well enough, don't go preaching sermons to an old friend!"

The reader may imagine the horror and dismay which seized upon the company as Mr. Trips thus addressed the lady of the house; and the footman was so astounded that he could neither move hand nor foot. Mrs. Twisden gave a faint shriek and then sat aghast: Mr. Twisden looked annihilated;—but Mr. Trips, nothing disconcerted—on the contrary, apparently excited to a most mischief-making humour—suddenly threw off his scratch-wig, his false whiskers, and his great handkerchief, thus revealing the whole of the most comical face that ever provoked shouts of laughter amongst the "gods" at a theatre.

"Now, don't yer recognize me, Betsy?" he exclaimed, with one leap like a frog up to Mrs. Twisden; and then, half squatting in front of her, he kept bobbing his head backward and forward like a mandarin. "Ah! I dare say *I am* altered—and so would you be if you had stuck to the stage as long as I have. But you cut it ten or a dozen years ago. Ah! it was fortunate for you that you

hooked Mr. Twisden there! But who the deuce would have thought it? I remember well enow when you suddenly disappeared from old Biggleswade's Company and no one knew what had become of yer. But now the mystery's out! Lord, I recognized yer again almost direct'y: there's no mistaking *you*, Betsy. Come, give your hand to an old pal!"—and thus speaking, Mr. Trips extended his great paw, which certainly was not the cleanest in the world.

A dreadful scene of confusion now ensued. Mr. Twisden, recovering somewhat of his presence of mind, rose from his seat ordering the footman "to turn that drunken fellow out." But this was more than John could do: for Mr. Trips insisted upon being heard; and he proceeded with great volubility to remind the horror-stricken lady of so many little facts connected with her early professional career, that she at last fainted outright. Mr. Trips now grew alarmed; and the Hon. Eustace Quentin managed to half drag and half lead him out of the room. Then, on getting him into the hall, he thrust a handful of guineas upon him and persuaded him to take his departure in the lumbering old fly in which he had been his rounds.

But here I must hasten to observe that amongst all the little reminiscences which the comic actor had conjured up relative to Mrs. Twisden, he had said nothing, nor even hinted at anything, to her moral discredit; and there is no reason to believe that when she was on the stage her conduct was otherwise than correct.

To resume. As a matter of course a scene of extraordinary confusion followed the exposure made by Mr. Trips. Mrs. Twisden was conveyed to her chamber—Mr. Twisden hurried after her, ostensibly to minister unto his beloved spouse, but most probably to escape from the unpleasant gaze of his friends—and soon afterwards prompt orders were given by the numerous guests for their carriages to be got ready. The party thus broke up two or three hours earlier than was intended; and every one save the Hon. Eustace Quentin left the house with a precipitation which showed that from thenceforth and for ever they cut the acquaintance of the Twisdens.

But in the meantime, while these things were occurring in the drawing-room, I was up in the nursery engaged partially in keeping, or endeavouring to keep, the unruly children in order, and partially with my own troubled reflections. The upper-nurse had gone down into the servants' hall to get her share of the creams, jellies, whips, and sweet things that had come down from the parlour; and I was left up in the nursery to keep the children quiet. Quantities of tarts and other things had certainly been sent up to them; and while engaged in the process of devouring the same, Master Gustavus, Miss Miranda, and Master Dickey were tolerably well satisfied: but when the dishes were emptied and two or three of them smashed in the quarrel who should have the *scraping*, I might almost say the *licking* of them, these three agreeable children began to plague my life out. Master Gustavus would insist upon going down stairs: but because I locked the door to prevent him, he kicked, butted at me like a ram, threw heavy things at me, and then sat down to cover me with abuse.

"You nasty disagreeable hussey, you—what are you? Nothing but a servant; and servants would all be beggars if it wasn't for rich people like my pa and ma who take you into their houses. You haven't got any pa and ma; and so I may kick you about just as I like. I know what you have—half-a-crown a week. You had two shillings at first; and now you have sixpence more. Only fancy, Miry dear, half-a-crown a week—isn't she rich? O my eye!"—and here he got up and began dancing round me, making such hideous faces and saying such provoking things that patient and good-tempered, thank God, as I am, I could really have boxed his ears.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he presently cried; "I'll tell my ma that you eat up all the sweets and hardly let us have a bit, and that you beat poor little Dickey because he cried for some."

"You are a very wicked story-teller, Master Gustavus," said I: "for you know I have not touched the sweet things, but gave them all to you children—and as for beating your little brother I would not do it. You are very naughty to me. I never go into Wye to buy myself any little thing, but what I always bring you some apples, or cakes, or sweetstuff; and since you know that I have two-and-sixpence a week, you can guess how well I am able to afford to buy you anything."

"Well, I am sure I don't want you to buy anything," rejoined the disagreeable boy: and then Miranda took up a similar strain, while Dickey began to cry—so that altogether it was a pleasant evening for me. But it was no exception to the general rule; and therefore the reader may suppose what kind of life it was that I led. And yet all this was nothing to other things that I have endured in other families, as will appear in the future chapters of my narrative.

Presently Master Dickey cried himself off to sleep; and by giving her a penny, I coaxed Miranda to go to bed. Then a little later Master Gustavus fell asleep in a chair; and I now had an opportunity of pondering more deliberately on a certain subject than I was previously able to do. I mean that appointment which the Hon. Mr. Eustace Quentin had made, or rather attempted to make, with me for the following morning. Now I will confess the truth, and acknowledge that my inclinations secretly prompted me to keep that appointment. Mr. Quentin had rendered me a great service: he had likewise treated me more as an equal than as an inferior, with a sort of respectful attention and not with the patronising familiarity which he might have been expected to bestow upon a humble menial in such a case. He had moreover expressed an interest in my welfare: he had asked me to tell him my story; and he had almost a right to demand it after the signal service he had done me. If, too, he considered that the incident of the morning was one which authorised him to interest himself in my affairs and bestow his friendship upon me, would it be grateful or respectful of me to refuse such innocent advances? Such were my reasonings on the one hand; and these being added to the fact that Mr. Quentin was a very handsome, elegant, unassuming young gentleman, it can scarcely be wondered if, as I just now said, my inclinations prompted me to keep the appointment.

But on the other hand, a sense of duty whispered that I should *not* keep the appointment. Mr.

Eustace Quentin had only done what any man possessing a particle of good feeling would have performed under such circumstances; and I had given him the only return which it was possible for me to afford and which he ought to expect—namely, my thanks. A friendship between one so highly placed and myself who was so lowly placed, was out of the question; and as to making known my history to so young a man, who was unmarried, and therefore having no household in which he could give me a better situation than the one I held, was absurd. Moreover, it was precisely because he *was* so handsome, elegant, and well-mannered, that I had no right even to think of such a thing as keeping this appointment. So, by dint of these reasonings, or rather counter-reasonings, I actually felt angry with myself for even having deliberated a point which my own good sense should at once have enabled me to make up my mind on; and I accordingly came to the conclusion that I would *not* go into the garden, or even near the garden, on the morrow, so long as Mr. Quentin remained in the house.

I felt satisfied with myself for having come to this decision: but nevertheless there was a tinge of regret on account of the necessity which urged me to that resolve. Not that I repined against the imperiousness of duty: but I could not help sighing when I thought that if I were a lady moving in the same sphere as himself, I might meet Mr. Quentin again—accept his friendship——and—and——

But I shall not now go on recording all the silly ridiculous things which entered into my head on that occasion. Suffice it for the reader to know that I had a sense of prudence and a moral courage sufficient to make me resolve that I would not keep the appointment that had been given: but if the determination thus to act *did* in any way cost me a pang, it is my business and not the reader's.

Well, I was giving way to the varied thoughts thus conjured up, when suddenly the upper-nurse rushed in and began telling me all that had taken place down stairs in the dining-room. She was rejoiced, as were the other servants: but I cannot say that I shared in that feeling. Mrs. Twisden had often been cruel, harsh, and unkind—very unkind—to me: but I wished her no harm—much less sought revenge; and I therefore experienced no pleasure in learning how she had been exposed. But as I subsequently pondered upon that exposure, I could now full well comprehend how it was that my mistress was occasionally wont to give way to those "heroics" and declamatory moods which had at various times so much surprised me. The mystery was now explained; and my only surprise was, that if her early breeding had been of a low character, how she had managed to acquire any of the ways and manners of a lady at all—which to a certain extent she had assuredly done. But then I reflected that she was a very quick, sharp, and intelligent woman; and with such qualities one may profit by close observation so as to become a clever imitator.

Early on the following morning Mr. Twisden sent for all the servants, one after the other, into the parlour, and told us that urgent business compelled him to go upon the Continent for some time, and that he should therefore break up his establishment. He gave us all a month's wages each; and when it came to my turn to go in and receive the announcement together with my money, I could not help feeling deeply for the old gentleman—for I saw that although he tried to carry it off in an unconcerned manner, he was really deeply affected and much humiliated. I remembered how often he had put in a kind word to take my part when his wife was scolding me; and I burst into tears.

"Poor girl, poor girl," he said: "you are the only one of all the servants who has any real feeling. God bless you!"—and he turned away towards the fire-place: but I could hear something that much resembled a deep sob.

I was now very deeply affected; and half-blinded by my tears I did not at the moment perceive, as I took my money from the table, that in addition to the number of shillings due to me there were two golden guineas. Thinking he had made a mistake, I stammered forth some observation to draw his attention to the circumstance. But waving his hand impatiently, without turning his head, he said in a broken voice, "Take it, take it, Mary; and may you never want a friend!"

I could not find words to thank him; so profoundly were my feelings moved that they choked my utterance. But he knew that I was grateful: for he heard me sobbing, and I was compelled to wait for nearly a minute at the room-door ere I could so far tranquillize myself as to issue forth again.

As I was crossing the hall to ascend the stairs, I found myself face to face with Mr. Quentin.

"I am going to the garden," he hastily whispered.

I shook my head, darted up the stairs, and hastening to my own room, proceeded to pack up my box. When this was done, I repaired to the nursery to bid the children "good-bye;" but I was told by the upper-nurse, who was also just about to depart, that Mrs. Twisden had rung for them while I was down stairs and they were all three in her room. Thither I accordingly hastened, and knocked at the door.

"Who's there?" sharply demanded Mrs. Twisden's voice from the inside.

"It's Mary, ma'am," I said; "come to wish you 'good-bye' and the children too."

"Oh! you can't come in," exclaimed Mrs. Twisden. "Good-bye," she added abruptly.

I could not conceive how it was possible for her to give herself airs or remain in an ill-humour under such circumstances; but being now anxious to get away, I did not stop to ponder upon this little incident. Leaving my box to be fetched by the carrier, I said "good bye" to my fellow-servants, and sped away towards Wye without looking behind me. I feared lest Mr. Quentin should be walking about; and in pursuance of the resolution I had adopted, I did not wish to meet him.

CHAPTER IX.

THE THREE BELLS ALE-HOUSE.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when I entered Ashford again, after an absence of more than a year. As the carrier's van passed by Mrs. Whitfield's, I alighted there, and in a few minutes had the pleasure of embracing my two sisters.

This satisfaction was however the least thing damped by what I thought was the coldness of Sarah's manner towards me: but that transitory pang was soon forgotten in the contemplation of the exuberant joy with which dear little Jane welcomed me. She clung round my neck, crying and laughing, and saying such pretty things that it was easy to perceive how devotedly attached the dear girl was to me; and I hugged and kissed her again and again in the tenderest manner.

When I had leisure to survey my two sisters, I found them wonderfully improved. Sarah, who was now thirteen years old, was a fine tall girl for her age, and somewhat precocious-looking. Jane, who was eleven, seemed as fat and good-humoured as ever, and reminded me of the great wax-dolls which I had seen in the shops at Canterbury. Both the girls were very neatly, almost elegantly dressed, and in a manner quite superior to their condition in life and also inconsistent with their prospects, if they were to go out to service when old enough. On questioning them, I found that they went to a very good Young Ladies' Day School close by, and that what they learnt was like their apparel—namely, above their condition. I was moreover told that they had latterly taken all their meals with Mrs. Whitfield, and were indeed her companions in the drawing-room; and I felt somewhat grieved at this. Not that I envied my sisters' prosperity—God forbid! I would have cheerfully sacrificed my life to have ensured its permanence; and it was because I felt that it would *not* be permanent, but must cease some time or another, that my heart misgave me.

It was in a parlour on the ground-floor that this interview with my sisters took place; and presently Mrs. Whitfield entered. She was an old lady of sixty—tall, thin, and wrinkled—with great horn spectacles on her hooked-nose. She was tolerably well off, and was excessively benevolent, but as eccentric and whimsical as she was charitable. Sitting down in a narrow awkward arm-chair with a great high back, and in which she placed herself bolt upright as if she were a statue, she bade me in a kind tone resume the seat from which I had risen on her entrance: then after a few questions relative to myself, she said, "You are a good steady young woman and will get on well. In fact, it is only by leaving you to push your own way in the world that you will do it thoroughly: and so you must try and rise in time to the rank of housekeeper in some rich family. Then you will be settled for life. As for your two sisters here, I have given them a fair trial; and liking them well enough, am now having them educated to be nursery-governesses when the proper time comes. They are good girls, but Sarah is perhaps too self-willed and vain, while Jane is too full of spirits and too frolicsome. However, I dare say they will get on very well: but as I now propose to do for them much more than I intended at first when I gave them a home, I mean to do it in my own way and without interference from any one. So, if you remain in Ashford, don't come and see them oftener than once a fortnight, for fear of unsettling their minds. Indeed, I have already told your brother William this; but as for your brother Robert, I am sorry to say that I have been compelled to forbid him from coming near the house at all."

"Indeed!" I exclaimed, all my thoughts now suddenly and painfully turned into a new channel. "I hope, ma'am, he has not been doing anything wrong?"

"Oh! I don't accuse him of anything specific," cried the old lady: "but I am afraid he goes with bad characters, and is an idle young fellow. Besides, tho last time he called here, I certainly missed a silver spoon in a very unaccountable manner——"

"Good heavens, ma'am!" I exclaimed, bursting into tears: "you would not have me infer that my brother—the brother too of these dear girls—is a thief?"

"I did not use the word," said the old lady, in that quiet way which was really quite provoking. "All I can add is that he comes not to my house any more. But whatever he has done or may do, will not prejudice me in respect to your two sisters. As long as they conduct themselves well, I shall not for a single moment hold them answerable for the faults of their relatives."

Thus spake the eccentric old lady; and fancying that she was growing impatient of my stay, I hastened to abridge it. She did not invite me to return; and having embraced my sisters, I turned away from the house with a somewhat heavy heart.

I now directed my steps to Mr. Collins' abode; and on ringing at the bell, the door was immediately opened by William. But though he instantaneously threw himself into my arms and embraced me affectionately, I had no difficulty in observing that he was very far from happy; and on his taking me into a little parlour behind the surgery, where there happened to be no one at the moment, I questioned him relative to his desponding looks. The first thing he told me gave me great pain. Our kind benefactor Mr. Collins had lately experienced so severe a pecuniary loss through the treachery of a friend, that he had been compelled to quit Ashford abruptly that very morning in order to avoid being arrested for debt; and the bailiffs were at that moment in the house. I was greatly shocked at hearing this, the more so as William informed me that from what he had heard the assistant and the bailiffs say, everything would be sold off. Fortunately Mr. Collins was a single man, having no one dependant on him: but this reflection was only a trifling mitigation, not an abrogation of the source of grief.

But William had other causes for despondency and sorrow: and he assured me that if I had not come to Ashford just at this time, he should have written to me on certain serious matters—adding that if he had not done so before, it was because he had postponed as long as possible the taking up his pen to address me in a manner that would give me pain. His words alarmed me; and in order to put me out of suspense he proceeded to speak as follows:—

"My dear Mary, in the first place I am afraid that Mrs. Whitfield is bringing up Sarah and Jane in a manner that will scarcely prove beneficial to them in after-life. At first, as indeed I wrote and told you, they lived in the kitchen along with the maid-servants and went to a respectable plain day-school. But within the last few weeks Mrs. Whitfield has made quite a change in all that. Sarah and Jane are taken into the parlour, dressed

handsomely, and sent to a new school, where they learn music and dancing. Mrs. Whitfield says she means to make them nursery-governesses; and although until lately I could go and see them as often as I liked, she has told me within the last few weeks that I am not to call more frequently than once a fortnight. I know that the old lady is celebrated for her eccentricities, and look upon this as a mere whim or fancy on her part: but I am afraid it will prove a dear one for our poor sisters."

I interrupted my brother William for the purpose of explaining to him that these were precisely my fears, and the deductions I had made from the visit just paid to Mrs. Whitfield's residence.

"But she is reputed to have some little amount of property," continued William, "entirely at her own disposal. Indeed, I dare say you have heard it whispered, as I have done more than once, that she is a miser and has a great hoard in her house.

Nor does it appear that she has any relations—at least, she has never been known to be visited by any, nor yet to speak of them; and therefore, considering all these things, it is possible, my dear Mary, that we have been viewing matters in the gloomiest light."

"I hope it may prove so," was my answer, delivered with a foreboding sigh.

"Well, let us hope so," added William, in his earnest generous-hearted manner. "Indeed, several persons, and poor Mr. Collins amongst the rest, have assured me that Mrs. Whitfield, having taken it into her head to treat Sarah and Jane in this manner, will no doubt leave them some of her property, if not all of it; and in that case we shall not have to regret that our sisters are being so well brought up."

"No—far from it," I exclaimed, with the fervour of an aspiration. "But tell me, dear William, have you related *all* your troubles—*all* your sources of

annoyance?"—and I looked at him in a manner of anxious inquiry, as I said in a half-frightened tone, "And Robert?"

"Ah!" and William's countenance instantaneously fell as he shook his head ominously.

"Good heavens!" I cried: "what mean you? Has anything occurred? is he still with Mr. Matthews?"

"He is still at Mr. Matthews'," returned William, with a look and manner uncommonly serious for a boy of his years,—for he was only fifteen at the time of which I am writing.

"But you mean to say he is idle—does no work—is perhaps dissipated, and has fallen into bad company?" said I, slowly and hesitatingly giving utterance to the words which I thus put interrogatively, and not without the deep apprehension that matters might be even worse than I had speculatively shadowed forth.

"Oh! my dearest Mary," cried William, bursting into tears, "Robert, I regret to say, is *all* that you have conjectured—and I fear—I fear, alas! that he will soon become worse!"

"Tell me everything, William — keep nothing from me!" said I. "It is right and proper that I should know all."

"Yes—I will conceal nothing from you, Mary," resumed William, wiping his eyes. "You know—or I should rather say you have seen those two bad characters who once insulted father because he would not go to the ale-house—I mean Nick Sawbridge, and that man who is invariably known as Ben Bulldog—I do not know what his real name is——"

"And do you mean me to understand," said I, the very blood curdling in my veins, "that Robert frequents the society of such dreadful characters as these?"

"It is too true," responded William. "He has of late been very often with them; and Mr. Matthews has complained to Mr. Collins. In fact, if it were not out of consideration for us all, Mr. Matthews would have him up before the magistrate and get his indentures set aside, besides perhaps having him sent to prison."

"O heavens!" I exclaimed: "this is indeed evil tidings! Of course you know Robert came to see me three weeks ago—and *then* he promised to reform."

"He told me that he had seen you," said William; "and since that time I have not once met him. Indeed, I fear he carefully avoids me: but I was told just now that for a week past he has been more constantly in the company of Nick Sawbridge and Ben Bulldog than ever—that they have plenty of money between them—and that our unfortunate brother has been tipsy in the streets even in the day-time."

"Alas! alas! is he then totally lost?" I exclaimed, clasping my hands together: "is he lost beyond all redemption? No, no—I will go and see him—I will reason with him—I will invoke the sainted names of our departed parents——But heavens!" I cried, suddenly struck by a frightful recollection: "you say that he has plenty of money which he spends in dissipation?—and Mrs. Whitfield hinted——Oh! I cannot allow my lips to frame the dreadful words——"

"I know what you mean," said William in a mournful tone, and with a blush rising quickly to his countenance—the evidence of that deep sense of the humiliation which he endured at the idea of his brother's shame, or rather iniquity. "Mrs. Whitfield told me of it. You mean the loss of the silver spoon?"

"I do," was my answer. "But think you, dear William, that it is possible our brother Robert——"

"I know not what to think," he exclaimed. "I would rather not think in the matter—I dare not think!"

A groan escaped my lips; and then we sat silent for some minutes gazing upon each other with looks full of deep and painful thought.

"I will go and seek him," at length I said, rising from my seat.

"But stop," said William: "stay a few moments. You have told me nothing about yourself."

I then explained to him how I had left my situation, adding that I was anxious to obtain another as speedily as possible; for the money that I possessed would only be sufficient to furnish me with a new supply of clothes, and I should therefore have no means of supporting myself were I to remain long out of place.

"I will make inquiries presently," said William, "of the different tradesmen where Mr. Collins deals. You can sleep here to-night, I have no doubt. Mr. Collins' housekeeper will give you a bed. At all events, I will tell you when you come back from seeing Robert."

I now took a temporary leave of William, and bent my way to Mr. Matthews, the master-carpenter to whom my brother Robert was apprenticed. I found the worthy man in his little counting-house; and the moment he saw me enter, he gave me his hand kindly, but shook his head gloomily. I burst into tears: for my heart now completely misgave me—and I felt that all I might say to Robert would most likely prove unavailing. He was not in the workshop at the time—nor indeed had he done a single thing in the shape of work for the last week, but had been absent with bad company, returning home very late or else stopping out all night. As for his staying out all night, I learnt from Mr. Matthews that he had frequently done so within the last few weeks—indeed, since he had become so very intimate with the two depraved characters whom my brother William had named. Mr. Matthews concluded by saying that he had now exercised his patience to that degree when he could do so no longer; and with pain and sorrow was it he assured me that he could only give my brother one more trial, which he would do for mine and William's sake. I thanked him sincerely, and then set out again in the hope of speedily meeting with the object of all this anxiety.

I bent my way to the churchyard, in order to visit my mother's grave; and kneeling by the turfy mound, I wept and prayed for several minutes. Thence I proceeded to take a view of the cottage where I was born, and where the greater portion of my life had been passed. It was tenanted by a working-man and his family; but how altered was its aspect from what it was when last I saw it! It had now every appearance of dirt, debauchery, squalor and neglect. Several of the windows were broken, and the holes stuffed up with rags or covered with brown paper. The garden-fence was sadly dilapidated: three or four dirty half-naked children were playing about at the door-way; and some few wretched rags and tatters of clothing hung upon the

clothes'-line by the side of the house. I turned away in sorrow—yes, with a pang as if my heart suddenly grew tight; for it seemed to me that the home of my parents was desecrated by the condition to which I now saw it reduced.

Thence I bent my way towards the *Three Bells* ale-house, which stood on the outskirts of the town; and as I drew near the front-door, which stood wide open, I heard loud voices joining in the chorus of some bacchanalian song. It was now dark, and the candles were lighted inside the place. I stopped and listened. The song continued: and alas! with an agonizing sensation at the heart did I recognize my brother Robert's voice blending with the rest. I thought I should have screamed and sunk down in a fit: but with a violent effort I subdued my feelings so as to preserve my presence of mind. Stepping up to the window of the room whence the uproar appeared to proceed, I was enabled to peep over the blind; and my looks embraced the interior of the apartment. Five or six men were drinking and smoking; and through the cloud of fleecy vapour which seemed to form the atmosphere of the den, I beheld my brother seated at a table precisely opposite the window. His countenance was flushed with drinking—his hair was in disorder—and though he was evidently not tipsy, yet he was on the high road towards intoxication. He was clad in a new suit of good cloth clothes, although his toilette denoted all the negligence of dissipated habits; and my heart sickened as I noticed that he was seated between Nick Sawbridge and Ben Bulldog.

Here I pause for a few minutes to describe these characters—although the task is a most unpleasant one, not only on account of the natural dislike which one has to deal deliberately with the description of *infamy personified*, but also for many, many painful reasons which will appear in the course of this narrative.

Nick Sawbridge, then, was a man of about thirty-five years of age at the time I mention. He was a short, thin, nimble-looking person, with a blotched face and a most repulsive look. He was invariably dressed in the shabbiest manner, even when it was reputed that he had picked up money by his evil courses. But he seemed utterly indifferent as to personal appearance, and to delight only in every kind of debauchery and low revel.

Quite a different character in outward appearance was Ben Bulldog. Picture to yourself a short, thick-set individual, without the slightest appearance of a neck—a bullet-shaped head—a nose beaten in nearly flat with the face—an enormous mouth garnished with fangs rather than teeth, and singularly white—deep-set eyes with a savage expression—hair cropped quite close—and a total absence of whisker: picture to yourself all this, and you have the portrait of Ben Bulldog. But to make it complete, I may observe that he wore a dirty yellow shawl-neckerchief the ample folds of which completely concealed whatever little neck he might have—a greasy fustian shooting-jacket with large buttons of white bone—knee-breeches made of corduroy—and top-boots the upper leathers of which were never cleaned, nor the lower ones ever blacked. Altogether, he had a most ferocious appearance. His look was that of savage sullenness and dogged obstinacy: he seemed a man fitted for the perpetration of any crime, and whose instincts were of the most brutal character. Such was the impression which this horrible individual could not fail to make upon the mind of every one who contemplated him; and it was therefore enough to make my heart sink and my blood run cold to observe my unfortunate brother Robert seated by the side of such a dreadful character.

What Nick Sawbridge and Ben Bulldog were, I did not know at the time. For some years their names had been familiar to me as associated with every kind of low debauchery, ruffianism, and depravity. From my very girlhood such was the impression I had received concerning them; and I knew that if ever any mischief, dishonesty, or outrage occurred in Ashford or the neighbourhood, and could not positively be brought home to any one, suspicion invariably pointed to these two men as the evil-doers. They lived together in a dilapidated old house in the neighbourhood of the churchyard. The place had once been a baker's, and was fitted up with an oven and the usual apparatus for such a trade. But Sawbridge and the Bulldog did not use their premises for this purpose. Nevertheless, the chimney was now and then seen vomiting forth a cloud of black smoke; and it was said that the two men were wont, when not employed in a more questionable manner, to boil down horse-flesh, bake livers, and such-like nasty work, for cats'-meat men, sausage-makers, and so forth. But beyond this there was certainly something mysterious in their proceedings: for it was known that they received a great many letters from different parts of the country, and sometimes sent off a good number of large parcels, or boxes, carefully corded and sealed, so that the contents might not be known by the carriers entrusted with them. Rumour likewise declared that these parcels were never addressed in a straight-forward manner, but in some such style as this:—"*To A. B. C. To be left at the Coach-Office, Maidstone, till called for.*" Sometimes respectable persons from other towns in the county, on visiting Ashford, actually inquired for these two men and sought them in their premises. These circumstances had all combined to increase the mystery which clouded a portion of their avocations; and though the constable had had his eye upon them for some years, their secret in this respect had never been penetrated.

I have entered into all these particulars, not merely to show the reader that Nick Sawbridge and Ben Bulldog were two characters whose acquaintance was sure to be fatal to the reputation and the welfare of my poor brother, but also because the two men are unfortunately destined to play no inconsiderable part on the stage of my narrative—and fearful, sickening revelations will in due course have to be made concerning them. But now, with these few episodical observations let me resume the thread of my tale, reminding the reader that I was standing outside the window of the *Three Bells* ale-house, horrified and profoundly afflicted on perceiving my brother Robert seated between Nick Sawbridge and Ben Bulldog.

For a few minutes did I watch Robert's countenance through the window, in order to see if at any moment I could trace in its varying expression the slightest indication of regret or remorse for his present fallen condition. But I could not discover any such source of hopefulness. I beheld him enjoy the coarse mirth of his two companions and

the rest of the company: I saw him play some low practical joke with Sawbridge, and pat the Bulldog on the back; and in a word, I could not conceal from myself the lamentable truth that he was "hail fellow well met" with the present society. Heavens! what a conclusion was this to come to! and if his poor mother who lay a shrouded slumberer in the dark, damp solitude of the churchyard at no great distance, could have risen from her grave to behold him now——But I dare not pursue the theme: it overpowers me with the crucifixion of anguish thus to form the bare idea!

My course was decided upon: I was determined how to act. Timid, shrinking young damsel as I was, I mustered up a degree of courage that even surprised myself—and entered the ale-house.

"Halloa, young woman! who do you want?" growled the landlord as he rose from a chair behind the bar where he was smoking his pipe.

"I want a brother whom this house of your's is leading to ruin:"—and as I thus spoke in a firm voice, I threw my deeply sorrowful and reproachful looks upon him.

"Ah! what? Miss Price!" ejaculated the man in surprise. "Well, I ought to have known you at once by the mourning. But shall I call Robert out for you?"

"No, I thank you," was my cold response. "If there be any hope for him, he will now feel ashamed and humiliated at the idea of his sister being compelled to seek him in such a place and in such company."

"Ashamed indeed!" echoed the landlord, with a coarse laugh.

Without heeding him farther, I threw open the door, and stopped short on the threshold. The cloud of tobacco-smoke that gushed forth almost suffocated me; and the fumes of debauchery made my heart heave.

"What, Mary! is this you?" cried Robert, suddenly starting up: and all in a moment, as if actually struck by the very feeling with which I sought to inspire him by my presence there, he became covered with confusion.

"Step out, Mary—I'll join you at once," he stammered forth as he endeavoured to pass by the Bulldog.

"No, don't go, Bob," exclaimed this ferocious character, whose voice had all the intonations of a savage brutality, hoarse, deep, thick, and growling. "But, my eye! what a sweet pretty gal your sister has grown! Let her come and join us. What's a good place for the brother must be for the sister; and if so be there isn't room enow on this bench she shall sit on my knee."

Thereupon he burst into a great coarse ruffian-like laugh, in which he was joined by every one present—except my brother, who looked bewildered how to act.

"Come, Robert dear—for God's sake come!" said I with accents of the most fervid entreaty; and I saw that he was still more deeply moved than at first.

"What the devil does all this mean?" cried Nick Sawbridge. "I suppose, Bob, you ain't a-going to tie yourself to your sister's apron-strings? If so, I'm blowed if me and the Bulldog won't cut you bang at once!"

"Robert, Robert dear!" I exclaimed, in a voice that I know must have been piteous and penetrating to a degree: "do come with me, if only for a few minutes! I wish to speak to you on important matters."

"Then don't speak dry-lipped, my dear," said the Bulldog, extending towards me a pewter-pot which he grasped with his great fist that might have felled an ox: and again his loud, coarse brutal laugh rang through the room.

"Robert, will you stand there while I am thus insulted?" I exclaimed, a dizziness now coming over me and all my presence of mind rapidly ebbing away.

My brother was evidently labouring under feelings of the most painful and conflicting nature indeed his countenance at this moment was a complete index to all that was passing in his mind. His better nature urged him to obey my summons; but the fear of provoking ridicule on the part of his companions chained him to the spot. Besides, he was between the two desperate characters who had become his evil genii: and neither made way to allow him to pass.

"Robert, will you come? Do you not wish—have you nothing to say to your sister after so long a separation?"—and I believe that as I thus spoke, never did woman's looks express more passionate entreaty.

"What nonsense!" growled the Bulldog. "If I had a psalm-singing sister like this, I'd deuced soon send her off about her own business. If she really likes you, Bob, let her acknowledge as her friends them as is your'n."

"So I say!" ejaculated Nick Sawbridge: and then there was a general expression of approval all round.

"Excuse me a minute," said Robert, now suddenly appearing to muster up courage to act decisively. "I *must* just say three or four words to her—and then I'll come back."

Thus speaking, he pushed away the table from before him in such a manner that he was enabled to pass out from between his two companions; and with hurried pace he quitted the room. But just as he closed the door behind him, the voice of the Bulldog was heard vociferating between a roar and a growl, "If you don't come back in three minutes, me and Nick will never speak to you again.

I heard my brother mutter a bitter imprecation as those words reached his ear; and hurrying me out of the ale-house, he said in a sharp savage tone, "Why did you seek me here?"

"In the first place I sought you, Robert," said I, "where you ought to have been found——"

"At old Matthews', I suppose?" he exclaimed abruptly. "Well, and he has been telling you a pretty tale, no doubt?"

"He could tell me nothing worse than I have just seen with my own eyes," was my answer, given in a tone of gentle but profoundly mournful reproach. "Ah! Robert, is this the way you fulfil the promise you made me when last I saw you? Good heavens! what will become of you? I shudder when I think of it. Those dreadful men whom you have just left will lead you into every kind of wickedness."

"I tell you what it is, Mary, if you have come to preach to me," said Robert, doggedly, "you and I shall part at once. I don't like sermons: I never did—and as for there being any harm in my just enjoying myself with my friends——"

"Friends!" I echoed: "good heavens! do you call *them* friends? O Robert! if your dear parents were alive, would you dare speak of such friends before them?"

"I wish you would not talk in this way," said my brother; and he glanced uneasily round towards the open door whence the light was streaming forth.

"Yes, yes—but I must," said I: and seizing his hands I led him farther away into the darkness—and while my heart fluttered anxiously with hope, for I really thought that he was moved, I said, "Do, my dear brother—I beseech and implore you—do give up the friendship of those men whom every body declares to be bad characters: and do—Oh! do go to your work, become steady, and avoid temptation! Remember, my dear, dear Robert, that although our parents are removed from us so far as their earthly presence is concerned, yet from another world are they looking down upon us: and Oh! conceive—picture to yourself—what must be the anguish, the agony of our dear mother—that mother who loved you, Robert, so tenderly and so well—and of that father who ever called you *his own dear boy*—what must be their anguish, I say, when they look down and behold the paths which you are pursuing? O Robert, Robert! do think of the past, so that it may help you for the present, and save you for the future! Think of our once happy home—of how we all loved each other, and how if one cried the rest would flock around to soothe and to console:—Oh! think of all this—and do not, do not be angry with me now for thus speaking to you! Besides, dear Robert, you are older than I—you are the eldest brother—and not only should I, your sister, be able to cling to you for protection and support, but your other brother and your two little sisters all should be able to regard you with pride, and love, and trustful affection. Ah! Robert, 'tis for you to be a father unto all of us; and by the spirits of our departed parents do I conjure you to renounce those evil companions who are leading you to destruction!"

My voice, which had been failing me during the latter part of this address, was now completely lost in the stifling sobs that convulsed my bosom; and raising both my brother's hands to my lips, I covered them with kisses and tears. That he was moved I have no doubt, although it was too dark for me to read the workings of his countenance. But his breath came quickly—I could hear the rapid pulsations of his heart—and he did not attempt to withdraw his hands from mine.

"Tell me, Robert—tell me," I asked, again recovering the power of utterance, "will you renounce those companions? will you come with me now, somewhere—anywhere—so that we may talk together?"

But at this moment the door of the ale-house, from which we had retired about thirty yards, was suddenly darkened by an ominous figure which I immediately recognized with a cold shudder; and the brutal voice of the Bulldog was heard exclaiming, "Now then, Bob, I and Nick are off unless you come back directly."

The summons was like that of the Evil One penetrating through the darkness of the night to the wretched being who has sold his soul; and my unhappy brother, as if finding it impossible to struggle against a spell more potent than himself, withdrew his hands abruptly, saying in a quick excited tone, "Well, Mary, you see I must go back, or else they will be offended. But come to-morrow to the workshop, and you will find me there."

"Stop—one word, I conjure you!" cried I, almost frantic with grief—and I clung to him desperately.

But he broke away from me, and in another moment rejoined his terrible companion at the ale-house door. Then I saw them disappear inside together; and with a sensation as if my heart were about to burst, I dragged myself back to Mr. Collins' abode.

I related to William all that had taken place; and we mingled our tears together. Mr. Collins' housekeeper allowed me to share her bed; and on the following morning I and William proceeded early together to Mr. Matthews', in the hope of catching Robert before he had time to go out. But to our ineffable grief we learnt that having come home very late and much intoxicated, he had risen early and started off again, coolly leaving a message for Mr. Matthews to the effect that he was going to take a week's holiday and should not return till the expiration of that time. So great was the affliction of myself and William, that Mr. Matthews invited us into his parlour to sit down; and when we were a little composed, he questioned me relative to my own position. I told him that I was out of place and wished to obtain one as soon as possible. Thereupon, as if struck by a sudden recollection, he took up a county newspaper—searched for a few moments amidst its advertising columns—and at length directed my attention to the following announcement:—

WANTED, in a Protestant tradesman's family, a Shopman who thoroughly understands the grocery business and who fears the Lord. There is also a vacancy in the same family for a nurse-maid, who understands plain needlework, is of Church of England principles, and will not object to make herself generally useful. Apply (if by letter, enclosing testimonials) to J. O. M., Snargate Street, Dover.

"Now," observed Mr. Matthews, with a half smile upon his countenance, "this is the advertisement of a very old friend of mine, John Obadiah Messiter—a grocer in a large way of business; and he happens at this moment to be at Ashford for some purpose or another. He and his wife are very pious people; but I do not know any reason why you should not apply for the situation. Not, mind you, that I know anything of their domestic mode of life: for I have never visited their establishment at Dover. Messiter, however, was an old schoolfellow of mine; and I know him to be a quiet, plodding, business-like, respectable man. Now, what say you?"

I cheerfully accepted the proposal: and provided with a letter from Mr. Matthews, I at once repaired to the *Saracen's Head*, where Mr. Messiter was staying. He was in-doors at the moment; and while William waited outside, I was conducted to a room where Mr. Messiter was seated. He was a tall thin man—with a pale, or rather sallow complexion—long sharp features—and iron-grey hair brushed straight upright off his forehead. He wore a white cravat, and high shirt collars, very stiff and projecting in sharp points like gills beyond the corners of his lips, which by

the bye were thin, compressed, and gave an expression of prim sanctimoniousness to his countenance. He was dressed in a complete suit of black, his trousers being short and showing his black cotton stockings and rather clumsy shoes. A hat, very low in the crown and very broad in the brim, lay upon the table, in company with a faded cotton umbrella of very considerable proportions.

On being introduced to Mr. Messiter's presence, I stated my business; and he listened with the greatest attention. He then read the letter which Mr. Matthews had sent; and all this time he uttered not a word. Nor did he speak until he had read the letter twice over, examining the address so as to be sure it was sent to him, and then deliberately consigned it to a great black pocket-book tied round with a shoe-string.

"And you are the young woman, Mary Price, mentioned in this letter?" he said at length breaking silence and speaking in a quiet, slow, and deliberate manner; then on receiving my affirmative answer, he continued to observe, "You have seen my advertisement—you know what I want and what I expect. Are you sure that you are piously inclined?"

"I believe, sir, that I have a proper sense of the importance of religion," was my answer.

"I hope so, young woman," observed Mr. Messiter, shaking his head with solemn gravity. "You are accustomed to read the Word of God?"

"I am, sir," was the reply.

"And you can do plain-sewing?" was the next question.

"I can do all kinds of simple needle-work, sir."

"You understand the Gospel and can nurse a baby?" continued Mr. Messiter, looking at me very hard as if everything depended on my answer.

I of course gave an affirmative response, although not over well liking the strange manner in which he coupled religious with household affairs.

"I am very particular, young woman," he continued; "and my wife is very particular also. She is a most amiable, exemplary, and estimable woman—meek and lowly in her sphere—a good wife, a kind mother, and an affectionate friend. If you think that you can make yourself agreeable to such a pattern-woman, I have no objection to give you a trial."

I thanked him, and declared my intention and desire to do my best to give satisfaction.

"And now about wages?" he said.

I answered that I would leave this to him, a comfortable home with a sufficiency to procure adequate clothing being the extent of my wants.

"Well," said he, with exceeding gravity, "the labourer is worthy of his hire; and if you come into my vineyard it shall be at a price. What say you to 5*l.* a-year, with an occasional left-off gown of Mrs. Messiter's, and an increase at the end of the first year if mutually satisfied?"

This was less than I had been receiving latterly at Twisden Lodge; but I made no objection—and having therefore assented, was duly engaged.

"I leave this afternoon at two o'clock by the van for Canterbury," observed Mr. Messiter, "so as to save the London coach for Dover. If you like to accompany me, it will be as well."

I gladly accepted this offer, as I did not like the idea of travelling alone; and taking a temporary leave of Mr. Messiter, I hastened to rejoin William in the passage. At that moment Mad Tommy, the poor idiot of whom I have previously spoken, entered the hotel, carrying in his hand a large deal box tied round with cord, the knots of which were sealed as a safeguard against its being opened by any prying individual.

"Well, Miss," he said, upon seeing me and gazing at me in his wonted vacant manner, "glad to meet you—glad to meet you again. You look well—very well. Not forgot me—eh? Not likely—not likely. How d'ye do, Master William? Growing fine lad. Always good to poor Tommy. Sometimes give him halfpence—don't forget him—not likely, not likely!" —and then he grinned in his own peculiar fashion.

While he was thus speaking, the waiter came up and asked him who he wanted. I and William accordingly went away; and I told my brother that I had engaged myself for Mr. Messiter's place. My preparations for departure were soon made: I went and bade farewell to Sarah and Jane, and then took leave of my dear brother William. He promised to write to me very soon to tell me how Mr. Collins got on, and also anything that might arise concerning our unfortunate brother Robert. Thus we parted, in tears—and on returning to the *Saracen's Head*, I found Mr. Messiter waiting for me. The Canterbury van almost immediately drove up to the door: but as the carrier was putting up the baggage, I was struck by observing the box which Mad Tommy had brought, and on which Mr. Messiter's name was now written in large ink letters. This circumstance filled me at the moment with a strange misgiving: for I recollected all I had ever heard concerning Sawbridge and the Bulldog. But a few moments' reflection reassured me. Mr. Matthews had guaranteed Mr. Messiter's respectability, and I could not think it probable that he was in any way connected with such desperate characters. Even if he had anything at all to do with them, it could only be in the same way that other persons of respectability had, according to common rumour, some kind of dealing with them; and whatever this might be, I was bound to believe that bad as the men themselves were, such dealing was not in itself necessarily evil. In spite however of this reasoning, I almost regretted the precipitation with which I had formed my new engagement: but it was too late to retract.

Entering the van, it drove away; and as there were several other persons in it and I was not seated next to Mr. Messiter, no conversation passed between us. Indeed, he did not talk at all, and appeared to be of reserved and quiet disposition—a circumstance which impressed me in his favour. At Canterbury we took the London coach passing through to Dover, and our two hours' ride to the place of destination were likewise passed in silence. Indeed, so far as I was concerned, I remained wrapt up in a mournful reverie, my brother Robert being uppermost in my thoughts; and I trembled as I looked into the future. Poor William's position likewise served as a source of annoyance: for it seemed certain that he would lose his place at Mr. Collins'. But Mr. Matthews had promised to befriend him; and moreover William's good character was so well appreciated by all who knew him that he was not likely to be long in procuring another place.

CHAPTER X.

MY SECOND PLACE.

In the midst of these reflections the stage coach entered Dover; and as it passed along Snargate Street—the principal one in the town—it set us down at the door of Mr. Messiter's establishment. A delicate-looking, pale-faced woman, with a melancholy expression of countenance—not over neatly dressed, but indeed somewhat slovenly—opened the private door, and made her appearance on the threshold with a chamber candle in her hand.

"Well, dear—is this you?" she said meekly. "I am so glad you have returned."

"Well, you shall tell me all about that presently," interrupted Mr. Messiter, in a manner which I thought somewhat sharp.

The coachman handed in the luggage, and we entered the house. Mrs. Messiter—for she was the pale-faced woman—looked very hard at me, and then in a sort of timid frightened manner towards her husband, as if she longed to ask him who I was, but dared not.

"This young woman," he said at length, when he had divested himself of his great coat in the passage where we were all three standing, "is a respectable, pious, obliging person, well recommended by my friend Matthews—and I hope she will suit."

"I hope so too," said Mrs. Messiter faintly: but the glance she at the same time flung upon me was anything but friendly in its expression.

Mr. Messiter now advanced to the top of the kitchen-stairs, and called out "Betsy!" in a curt imperious tone. Then there was a quick trampling of steps up the said stairs; and a very dirty-looking female of middle age made her appearance. To her care was I consigned by my new master, who bade her give me some supper, show me to my room, and tell me what I was to do in the morning. I could not help observing that while he issued these instructions, his wife did not give utterance to a word, but stood behind him holding the candle as if she herself were a servant—although I could observe that she continued to eye me in no favourable manner.

As Mr. Matthews had represented to me, Mr. Messiter was a grocer in a flourishing way of business. He had the best looking shop of the kind in Snargate Street; and as he bore the reputation of being a very pious, benevolent, and respectable man, he was favoured with the custom of the clergymen, the leading gentry, and the most considerable families resident at Dover. He kept two shopmen, and two servants—the dirty-looking female to whom I have already alluded being one, and myself now being the other. My fellow-servant fulfilled the duties of cook and woman-of-all-work. She made the beds, prepared the food, cleaned down the house, and did the washing every Monday for the whole family. No wonder, then, that she was always dirty: it would have been a greater wonder if she ever had time to be clean, save and except on washing days, and then it was only her arms which benefitted by the suds. She had to get up at four every morning in summer, and at six in winter—Mr. Messiter himself rising from his bed to call her if he did not hear her stirring at the proper time. Indeed, the only reason why she was not compelled to turn out as early in winter as in summer, was because she would have required to burn candles during the dark season; and *that* was an extravagance not at all suiting Mr. Messiter's ideas of economy. The poor creature, who was a good-natured and really kind-hearted woman, was worked like a slave and paid like a pauper,—her wages being 7*l.* a year and to find her own tea and sugar—which I had not to do, as I had my meals in the parlour with the children after Mr. and Mrs. Messiter and the shopmen had had theirs.

And now a word with regard to these shopmen. One was a young man of about seven or eight-and-twenty—tall, lank, prim-looking, and sanctimonious, like his master—with a canting, whining tone, and a servile obsequiousness of manner. He walked on tiptoe, or as if he were treading on eggs—had an habitual bend in his gait—and seemed altogether one of those individuals who prefer gliding snake-like through the world, rather than walking manfully along their path, neither afraid of seeing or being seen.

His companion was a younger man, shorter and stouter—but also quiet in his manner, though sufficiently insinuating—or shall I say insidious?—in his discourse. Both were scrupulously cleanly in their persons, and always had on most unexceptionable aprons. The same may be observed of Mr. Messiter when serving in the shop; but be it recollected that all the washing was done at home on the most economical plan, and by poor Betsy.

The Messiters had six children—three boys and three girls—the youngest being a baby of a few months old, and the eldest a boy of about ten. I never saw such quiet docile children in all my life. And yet it was *not* pure and simple docility, which means the generous obedience of a nature properly pliant; but these poor children might be termed spirit-broken. There was no life in them: they scarcely played about up in the nursery—or when they did, it was in so languid and sickly a manner that it used to make my heart ache to see them. The first day I was there I fancied that they were shy on account of having a new nurse-maid; and I therefore endeavoured to make myself as agreeable to them as possible. To my surprise, they threw their arms about my neck and cried. Then I endeavoured to cheer them up, and I incited them to have a good game of romps: but the eldest boy—a mild, amiable, pensive-looking little fellow—said in so sad a tone, "that if they made a noise their papa would come up and scold or beat them." A film suddenly fell from my eyes: and now I understood at once Mr. Messiter's character! The timidity and trembling looks of his wife had not enlightened me: but the poor boy's observation made me comprehend the whole truth in a moment. Mr. Messiter was a tyrant!

This idea was speedily confirmed: for the grocer, under the garb of sanctity, was in reality one of the most hard-hearted despots in domestic life I have ever seen throughout my whole experience. Stingy to a degree—mean beyond all description—parsimonious in ways which I cannot stop to detail—all his thoughts appeared to be bent upon money-making. This pursuit deadened, if not destroyed, all better feelings. He kept shopmen

and servants only because it was necessary to sustain an appearance: but he grudged everything that was eaten beneath his roof. In this he was impartial enough: for he did not make any exception in favour of himself. On the contrary, he measured out his own food at each meal as nicely and as accurately as he meted out the portions for the rest. It was for this reason that he would not allow any meals to be taken up into the nursery; but when he, his wife, and his shopmen had finished at the breakfast-table, the dinner, and the tea, then a bell rang and I took down the children to have their repast, of course taking my own with them. Very often Mr. Messiter himself would sit by and watch us eating; and then the children never dared ask twice for anything. If he were not present, his wife would sit by to keep watch in his stead; and though it was evidently with a mother's pang that she refused her children the quantity they craved, she nevertheless was constrained to check them if she thought they were eating *too much*. For if Mr. Messiter fancied the provisions went too quickly, he would address his wife in the harshest, sternest, and severest language, so that the poor woman was frightened to death lest her own children should by eating too much draw down blame upon herself.

To enforce such rigorous parsimony in his establishment, Mr. Messiter was necessarily a tyrant: he could not be otherwise. But he was a despot in many other ways. The house being large, and so few servants kept, his wife was compelled to assist in the domestic arrangements to a degree that drew her into the performance of many menial things which no respectable tradesman's wife should have had to perform. Especially on every Monday was she compelled to take her share in the washing; and there was the mistress of one of the most thriving trading-establishments in Dover standing at a tub, "seconding" the things that Betsy washed! Moreover, her husband made her so mean and paltry an allowance for her own apparel, that she could not possibly dress as became her station; and feeling that she was *shabby*, she had by a not very unnatural transition grown *slovenly*. The shopmen were wretchedly paid, and yet were compelled to maintain a respectable appearance: but they were never allowed any holidays or any pleasure. On Sunday they went to church twice with the family; and in the evening they were made to go and teach the charity-children at the Sunday School. Nevertheless, the eldest shopman, whose name was Smithson, had been for six or seven years in Mr. Messiter's employ: but he was frequently changing his second shopman—and the one to whom I have already alluded had given notice to leave. Hence the advertisement I had seen in the county newspaper. The only wonder was how Mr. Messiter could get any shopman to stay with him at all, considering how badly they were paid, how wretchedly fed, how harshly treated, and how severely worked.

I have already noticed the unfavourable looks which Mrs. Messiter cast upon me the first night of my arrival: and for two or three days I observed that she surveyed me with the same feeling of suspicion or dislike. But gradually her manner changed; and she soon became as kind as she was at first distant. I could not account for this—nor did I indeed pause to reflect much upon it when once her manner had so altered towards me. She made me tell her my history—or rather as much of it as I deemed it proper to make known; and when she heard me eulogise my late parents and speak of the respectability with which I had been brought up, she said in a manner that was singularly pointed and emphatic, "Keep to those principles, Mary. You are young and good-looking; and unfortunately you are in a position of life which exposes you to temptations. You cannot therefore be too circumspect. And mind—mark well what I tell you! If you ever get into a family where the master of the house should so far forget himself as to address you in an improper manner, do not content yourself with merely rebuking him, but give immediate warning—or leave on the instant, if his conduct should have been very coarse. You understand me?"

"I do, ma'am," was my answer: "and though thanking you sincerely for this well-meant advice, rest assured that the course you have recommended is only that which under such circumstances I should have followed of my own accord."

"If you adhere to that resolve, Mary," resumed Mrs. Messiter, now patting my cheek caressingly and bending upon me a look full of kindness, "you may depend upon it you will not only do your duty towards yourself, but also to others. A good-looking servant, who either accepts the improper overtures of her master, or who does not sufficiently resent them as to make him desist in future, is not only wicked towards herself but also towards that master's wife. She may be the means of inducing a husband to go astray—to become unfaithful to a faithful wife——"

"O madam! I hope," was my exclamation, "that there are not many who act so wickedly as this!"

"I am glad that you have made the remark," said Mrs. Messiter; "because it proves that you really and truly are as innocent and as inexperienced as you seem to be. But when you know more of the world, Mary, and when you have been longer at service, you will find that there are many—far, far too many such wicked or thoughtless young women as I have just alluded to. But let us change the discourse," she suddenly added: "or rather let us not talk any more for the present."

It was after dinner that this conversation took place; and just as Mrs. Messiter had thus abruptly cut it short, she retreated to the window, where she dropped into her seat, instantly composing her looks so as not to appear to have been engaged in anything like exciting or interesting discourse. For a moment I wondered why she should thus dart away from me, and feared I had given her some offence: but the opening of the door and the return of her husband to the room explained the momentary singularity of her conduct. She had caught his footstep upon the stairs, her ear being more acutely sharpened than mine to that particular sound!

"What!" he said, in that hard tone in which he was accustomed to speak up-stairs, but which was so *very* different from the urbane modulation of his voice when serving a customer in the shop below,—"the dinner things not cleared away yet! Mrs

Messiter, if Mary allows these children to stuff as much as they like, I desire that *you* will put a proper check upon them."

"I have been watching them the whole time," said the poor woman, meekly, and with a frightened regard; "and I can assure you——"

"You need assure me of nothing," interrupted Mr. Messiter, stern, cold, and implacable; "because I have eyes and can see. This leg of mutton was cut from here to here when I rose from table: now see how much of it is gone! There will scarcely be enough to hash for to-morrow's dinner. Then look at this loaf!—it was cut down to here just now, and see what a quantity has disappeared!"—and as he thus spoke, he indicated with a fork the measurement of the articles to which he was alluding.

"Well, I can assure you, my dear," again said his wife, more timid and deprecatory than ever, "that the children have not eaten a bit more than usual."

"Then who *has?*" demanded Mr. Messiter, with awful sternness, as he slowly bent his eyes on me.

"Having a bad headache, sir," I said, "I have not eaten any dinner at all:"—and this was the truth.

"Well, then, it *must* be the children," resumed the grocer, still severe and cold; "and I desire that you," he continued, addressing himself to his wife, "will look to this in future."

Having thus spoken, he walked out of the room; and when the door closed behind him, I observed that the tears were trickling down the two eldest children's cheeks, while the three next sat as if petrified and overawed by their father's manner—the baby alone being unconscious of what was passing. Mrs. Messiter herself now burst into tears; and one after another did she kiss, and hug,

and fondle her children with a sort of distraction of highly-wrought feelings.

The scene I have just related will afford the reader an idea of Mr. Messiter's character. In fact, as he was a cold heartless tyrant, without pity and without remorse, so was his wife deeply unhappy. She evidently lived in constant dread of him. If she heard his footstep approaching, she would throw a frightened look around to assure herself that there was nothing out of place with which he might find fault. Once, when she broke a tumbler, she went up to bed pretending that she was indisposed—or rather perhaps made really ill by her fears. But her indisposition, whether feigned or real, did not disarm her husband of his resentment, or rather cold implacable resolve to lose no opportunity of saying harsh unfeeling things. Pitiless and stern, he ascended to her chamber; and there, standing by the bedside, he delivered himself of a long tirade on account of the broken tumbler, but sending so many barbed arrows into the poor woman's heart that if she had committed the most heinous crime he could not have addressed her in terms more coldly bitter or more inexorably stern.

Six weeks passed—and still the second shopman did not leave. The advertisement for one "who understood the grocery business and feared the Lord" brought a good many applicants: but none suited—or rather it suited none—so the junior assistant remained for the present.

One Sunday morning, when I was seated with the children at the breakfast-table, Mrs. Messiter occupying a chair near the window, she said, "I am afraid, Mary, that you find this life very, very dull?"

"No, madam, I do not," I answered: "for now and then I get a walk with the children on the beach or on the cliffs. Only I could wish for their sake, poor little things! that they were more lively. Nicer or better-behaved children I never met with——"

"And you, dear Mary, are so good to us," said the poor, sickly, pensive eldest boy, in a manner which though subdued and low, proved that the words came from his very heart.

"Yes—I have not failed to observe that Mary is fond of you, my dears; and I wish to heaven that I had the means of rewarding her! But I have not: no—I have not!"—and repeating the words mechanically, Mrs. Messiter rocked herself to and fro with the tears trickling down her cheeks.

"You are very kind to speak thus, ma'am," said I, much affected; "and I wish I could see you happier."

"Happier!" she cried, almost hysterically and with a convulsive wringing of the hands. "Oh! you know not all my troubles!"

"I am sorry—deeply, deeply sorry, to hear you talk thus," said I. "But pray compose yourself ma'am. See—these dear children are crying. Oh! let us not afflict them more than they are at present. Poor things! they are not like other children: all wholesome animation is crushed out of them."

"Hush, hush!" suddenly ejaculated Mrs. Messiter: "do not talk in that manner—we shall be overheard:"—then turning towards the window, she said, "What a dreadful day! the rain pours down in torrents. It is not like January—it is more like April."

"I suppose, ma'am," said I, "that there will be no going to church this morning?"

"Hush!" again said Mrs. Messiter: for she had caught the sound of her husband's step upon the stairs—and in a few moments he entered the room.

"Now, Mrs. Messiter," he said, "let us have these breakfast-things cleared away and the table arranged for prayers. There can be no going to church this morning; and therefore we will offer up our thanksgiving to the Lord for all mercies in the retirement of our own dwelling. Mrs. Messiter, you will please to see to this. I am going down to the shop a little, just to commune with my own thoughts; because there I can shut myself in and give way to those solemn reflections which are inspired by the holiness of the day. Mrs. Messiter, you will send down and summon me at the usual hour."

Having thus spoken, he was about to quit the room, when recollecting something, he turned and said in a sort of mysterious manner, "Where is that box? You know what I mean."

"It is in the cupboard on the landing, along with the other things. Shall I call one of the shopmen to help you down stairs with it?"

"No—certainly not," he said with peremptory sharpness. "You know that I never allow my shopmen to have an opportunity of prying into my affairs."

"I cannot help you down with it myself," said Mrs. Messiter, timidly: "I feel so weak and ill to-day——"

"Well then, Mary will," interrupted her husband. "Come," he added, turning towards me.

I accordingly followed him from the room; and on the landing he opened a large cupboard of which he possessed the key. I felt a strange sensation come over me as if it were a Bluebeard's closet the mysteries of which were about to be revealed: for the idea of that ominous box had not been lost to my recollection—but, on the contrary, had frequently haunted me. However, when the cupboard was open I beheld nothing to alarm me. The box was on the floor; and the shelves were covered with a quantity of parcels and packages, done up in brown paper carefully tied with string, and as I presently perceived, having various marks such as letters of the alphabet, numerals, crosses, and so on, written upon them. Having listened to assure himself that the shopmen were not moving about—(they were up in their room, dressing)—he bade me help him down stairs with the box and several of the packages which he selected: but ere we descended, he carefully locked the cupboard again and put the key in his pocket. When I had assisted him with the things into the shop, he tapped me on the cheek, saying, "There's a good girl, Mary."

I felt myself colouring suddenly: for I did not like such familiarity, although of course I thought he was merely treating me as an elderly person sometimes will act towards a young one; and hurrying from the shop I returned to the parlour upstairs. I immediately noticed on entering that Mrs. Messiter eyed me attentively—and I blushed again.

"What is the matter, Mary?" she asked in a tremulous voice and with a strange look.

"Master touched my face with his hand," said I at once; "and I did not like it. But of course he meant no harm."

Mrs. Messiter turned quickly away—and I saw that she put her pocket-handkerchief up to her eyes: then in a few moments she accosted me again, saying in a low deep voice, and with a quick sidelong glance to assure herself that the children could not overhear her, "Was that all your master did?"

"Had he done more, ma'am," said I, astonished at the question, and likewise indignant, "I should at once have told you."

"Yes, yes—I know you would, Mary," she said, again applying her handkerchief to her eyes and turning abruptly away.

The children looked on at this little scene in silent sorrow: they had been tutored by their father's sternness to follow out that harsh maxim so often inculcated in families, "to hear, see, and say nothing." But it was evident they *felt* much at thus observing their mother's grief; and the incident itself engendered vague and distant suspicions in my mind—suspicions which, though dim and undefined, nevertheless diminished my faith in the rigid correctness of my master's character.

To continue. The breakfast-things were cleared away—a green cloth was spread on the table—chairs were ranged around—bibles and prayer-books were placed to each seat—and at the upper end of the table, where a writing-desk was opened, a large church bible and prayer-book were placed thereon, and an arm-chair with a cushion was stationed in readiness. All these preparations were made by Mrs. Messiter herself; and when she had done she went up to dress. In half-an-hour she came down again to the parlour, where I remained with the children; and then she rang the bell three or four times. In walked Mr. Smithson and the other shopman, both attired in their Sunday's best, and looking as demure and sanctimonious as possible. Without saying a word they took their seats at the table; and in doing so, buried their faces in their hands for nearly a minute, as people do when praying silently in church. Then the children, who seemed to know very well what all this meant, made a movement towards the table; and Mrs. Messiter bade me approach with them. We accordingly all took our seats; and those children (the baby of course excepted) all went through the ceremony of holding down their heads for nearly a minute. With the eldest boy and girl there might have been the reality of prayer in this proceeding: but with the others it could only have been a mere mockery—or to say the least of it, only dumb-show. Again the bell was rung—but this time only once: and in obedience to this last summons came Betsy, having just slipped on a clean cap and her best gown for the occasion—such a best gown as it was!—but she had not been able to find time to wash all the grime off her face, much less from her hands; and through the transparency of her cap her hair looked grizzly and disordered, as if she had been creeping through a bush. But, poor creature, she had made as much improvement to her toilette as she had leisure to achieve! She also went through the ceremony of holding down her head upon her arms; but I do believe that so far as she was concerned, it was only to blow her nose with the corner of her apron.

It now seemed that all the arrangements were complete, so far as Mrs. Messiter's supervision of them was concerned: and she accordingly went down-stairs to summon her husband. But she had not left the room many moments, when Mr. Smithson, who sat on the right hand of the place arranged at the head of the table, suddenly looking down upon the floor, observed that something was wanting.

"The hassock," he said in a whisper across the table to the other assistant. "Mrs. Messiter has forgotten the hassock, and the governor will be so very much displeased:"—then flinging a glance at me, he said, "Perhaps you will have the kindness to run down and fetch up the hassock? You will find it in the little lumber-room at the back of the house."

This request was made to me at the moment, because Betsy had just taken the baby to fondle in her arms, and I was therefore free. I of course readily complied with the demand, especially as it was to save poor Mrs. Messiter a scolding from her husband. Lightly I tripped down-stairs; and as the door leading into the shop was ajar I was passing by on tiptoe towards the lumber-room at the end of the passage:—but at the instant Mr. Messiter's voice reached me, and I could not help overhearing what he said.

"Well," he was observing, "I have done a pretty good hour's business:"—and he chuckled as if something had put him into a most glorious humour—the first time I had known him to be in such a mood. "There! I have put the sloe-leaves into all that tea—the sand into this sugar—the turmeric into that mustard—the potato-flour into the arrow-root—the prepared starch into that cocoa—the chicory into the bean coffee—and the stuff out of the deal box into the ground coffee. This, Mrs. M., is what I call industry."

I heard no more. I dared not linger another instant—but, all in a trepidation, sped on to the lumber-room, got the hassock, and hastened noiselessly up-stairs again. Mr. Smithson pointed to the spot where it was to be placed—namely, underneath the head of the table: and having deposited it there, I resumed my seat.

Almost immediately afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Messiter entered the room—the former looking as grave and serious as if he were going to a funeral. Seating himself in the arm-chair at the head of the table, he leant forward upon the desk—buried his face in his hands—and murmured a prayer audibly. He then proceeded to read the Morning Service, with every appearance of a full sense of its sublime gravity. At the proper periods he knelt upon the hassock, joining his hands in the same manner as marble monuments in a church, and turning his eyes upwards in a way full well calculated to impress the observer with the conviction of his sanctity. Mr. Smithson acted as clerk, giving the responses in so lugubrious and sepulchral a tone that those very parts of the service which were intended as thanksgiving were make to sound like the outpourings of self-mortification. When the prayers were over, Mr. Messiter read a sermon from the works of some popular divine, and the text of which was, "Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you."

Now, I must candidly confess that for the first time in my life when engaged in the solemnity of worship, my thoughts wandered to far different subjects. The few words which I had overheard Mr.

Messiter utter to his wife in the shop below, had been for me a complete revelation. I saw, beyond all doubt, that he was a thorough hypocrite. Having first declared that he was going down to the shop *to commune with himself in a pious manner*, he had in reality taken advantage of that leisure time on the Sunday morning to do, as he expressed it, "a pretty good hour's business." And what was that business? how had his Sunday morning been employed? In a pursuit which I should call the most wicked dishonesty, mixing improper things with his goods—in fact practising the most scandalous adulterations!

As I sat looking at that man while reading God's holy word with every appearance of solemn unction and of the deepest conviction, I could not help experiencing a sensation bordering upon aversion and disgust towards such a rank impostor. A tyrant to his wife and children, he was also a knave in his business. A heartless father and despotic husband, he had not even the redeeming virtue of fair and honest dealing, but was in plain terms an unprincipled tradesman. I felt shocked at the hideousness in which this man's character was gradually developing itself to my comprehension; and as the singular observations his wife made to me about masters taking liberties with their servants, came back to my recollection—coupled with the little familiarity he had ere now shown towards me—I felt persuaded that there were yet worse traits in his private life over which the veil of hypocrisy had hitherto hung. Indeed, as I thus pursued the train of my reflections, I resolved when the proper day came to give a month's warning to leave his service.

CHAPTER XI.

SCENES UPON THE BEACH.

Upwards of two months had now elapsed since I had left Twisden Lodge, and during which time I had been at the Messiters'. I should have stated in its place, but did not choose to interrupt the thread of my narrative in the preceding chapter to insert the fact, that in a letter which I received from dear William he informed me that Mr. Collins had managed to procure the assistance of some friend in settling his most pressing liabilities; and that having accordingly returned to his business, it was going on as usual—although the embarrassments through which he had passed seemed to have impaired the energies and broken the spirits of that excellent man. As for Robert, he had altogether quitted Mr. Matthews' service, and his indentures were quashed. How he was living William could not say: he had taken a little lodging after leaving Mr. Matthews, and appeared to be at no loss for money: but whenever he met William he studiously shunned him, and in fact seemed desirous to break off all correspondence or communication with his brother and sisters whatever. He did not write to me—nor did it appear that he had ever been near Mrs. Whitfield's house since the affair of the lost silver spoon. As for Sarah and Jane, they continued quite well and were pursuing the same routine under Mrs. Whitfield's auspices as when I last saw them.

I need not say that the intelligence which I thus received concerning Robert, caused me the greatest pain. I wrote to him: but my letters continued unanswered—and often and often in the silence of the night, when darkness was upon the earth and weary heads lay upon their pillows, was I pressing a sleepless couch, watering *my* hard bolster with my tears, as I thought of what my unhappy brother was and what he might have been!

But I will not dwell at too great length on my various sources of sorrow and annoyance. I will only pause to observe that sad indeed is the lot of the poor servant-girl, who, amidst strangers, has no friend to whom she can confide her sorrows—no sympathising bosom into which she can pour forth the warm gush of her anguish. And yet is she expected to maintain a cheerful demeanour—never to be abstracted, for fear of being deemed sullen—never to look melancholy, for fear of being set down as discontented!

But to continue. Two months, I say, had elapsed since first I set foot in the Messiters' house; and it was now the beginning of February. One day—the weather being very fine for the season of the year—I was walking on the beach with the baby. The other children had gone with their mother to pass the day at an aunt's house—the only holiday they were allowed while I was in Mr. Messiter's service. I was proceeding slowly along, with the infant in my arms, when I suddenly heard an ejaculation of mingled surprise and joy uttered near me; and raising my looks, encountered those of the Hon. Mr. Eustace Quentin.

"Miss Price—is it indeed you?" he exclaimed; and springing forward, he caught my hand, pressing it with the most friendly warmth.

I was covered with confusion, and felt that I became crimson and pale by rapid transitions a dozen times in as many moments. To think that I—a poor humble, obscure nursery-maid, carrying a child—should be thus greeted by a young officer of elegant appearance, in his uniform, and thus bearing the insignia of his rank—was indeed enough to overwhelm me with shame and make me feel so mean, so little, and so paltry that I trembled like a guilty thing.

"Come and sit down here for one minute—only one minute," said Mr. Quentin; and he pointed to one of those neat iron chairs that are scattered about on Dover-beach for the convenience of loungers.

I complied mechanically. I was not mistress of myself. Indeed, it were scarcely possible to describe the feelings that now animated me,—covering my cheeks with blushes, making me tremble from head to foot, and causing my heart to flutter like a bird in its cage. Had he spoken or looked with the rudeness of Sir Aubrey Clavering, I should have resented it in a moment and my blood would have boiled with indignation: but there was something so mild and yet so manly—so kind and so frank-hearted—in the bearing, the words, and the appearance of Eustace Quentin, that I felt irresistibly attracted towards him. I accordingly seated myself on the chair; and he placed himself by my side.

"I am glad to see you again, Miss Price," he said, addressing me with all the respectful consideration which he would have shown towards an equal. "You left Twisden Lodge very suddenly," he continued: "indeed, the whole establishment was broken up with equal abruptness—but I did not leave without making some little inquiries con-

cerning you of the old gardener whom Mr. Twisden left in charge of the premises. Do not be angry with me for having taken such a liberty in respect to you. It was through no idle curiosity, I assure you."

I listened—and I should be telling the untruth if I were to say that the words which thus fell upon my ears, carried no feeling of pleasure with them into the heart. They *did*—and I sat speechless, in a kind of dreamy state of happiness which I could scarcely fancy to be real. But my eyes were downcast—I dared not look up at my companion—and I felt that my cheeks were glowing and my heart was palpitating.

"You remember that I had asked you to meet me in the garden at a certain hour," he continued: "but I presume that the unexpected scene which occurred at the Lodge and which caused your abrupt departure, prevented you?"

"No, sir," I observed, now suddenly recovering the faculty of speech. "Permit me to assure you that I hastened my departure far more than was absolutely necessary, because—to speak frankly—I was unwilling to meet you as you desired."

"I am glad you have told me this!" he exclaimed joyfully: "it confirms all that I heard in your praise!"

"You will pardon me, sir," I said, now thoroughly awakened to a sense of the impropriety of remaining any longer in discourse with the young officer, "if I request that you will at once leave me. I appreciate all your kindness—your good feeling—but——"

And I stopped short: for the suffocating emotions that rose up from my heart, stifled further utterance. I felt—Oh! so deeply felt, the want of a sincere true friend: but I dared not form this friendship that seemed to be proffered me now—and yet to refuse it was like parting from the very talisman of happiness itself!

"Not for worlds will I detain you against your will!" he exclaimed, with a strange mingling of hauteur and reproach in his tone—so that I could not help glancing suddenly up at him, and his countenance showed that he was hurt and that his feelings were wounded by my manner. "Ah!" he immediately cried in accents that suddenly lost all their hauteur and were laden only with mild and melancholy reproach, "if you only knew what I suffered on account of that adventure which first made me acquainted with you——"

"Suffered?" I exclaimed, now deeply interested.

"Yes," he continued: "do you not remember that Sir Aubrey Clavering declared I should give him satisfaction for what then took place?"

"Satisfaction?" I repeated quickly; and at the same moment the truth flashed in upon my mind—for I had very recently read in a book something about duelling. "Is it possible——"

"It is quite possible, because it is true," he added, smiling, "that I was compelled to fight with Major Clavering two days after that occurrence at Twisden Lodge. I was wounded in the left arm——"

"Wounded!" I echoed, now gazing upon him in dismay—and all my thoughts were rivetted on the topic.

"Yes—I was wounded—and until a few days ago I wore this arm in a sling," he said: "but it is now quite well."

"And you were wounded on my account?" said I, feeling for him as deeply as if he had been a brother.

"It is nothing, Miss Price—nothing at all," he said, still smiling; "nor did I tell you this to glorify myself. Indeed, I know not why I told it you at all—and perhaps I was wrong to do so——"

"No, no!" I exclaimed: "you were right, sir, to make me aware of the full extent of the obligation which I owe you. But heavens! how can I ever repay it?"—and again was the extreme humbleness of my position in comparison with that of the Hon. Eustace Quentin, forcefully and painfully brought back to my contemplation.

He made no reply, but appeared troubled—not with the trouble of any thought derogatory to me or dishonourable to himself, but as if *he* also, as well as I, had suddenly become reminded of the immense gulf that separated us from each other and made it even ridiculous to talk of obligations or the possibility of repaying them.

"Have you been long at Dover?" he asked, after a long pause, and evidently because he felt that the silence was growing awkward and painful.

"Two months," I answered: "but I intend to leave as soon as circumstances will permit. And now, sir, you will pardon me if I quit you abruptly—but not without once more expressing my deep gratitude for what you did for me, and my sorrow on account of what you have suffered."

"One word more!" he exclaimed, also rising from the seat as I had done. "In consequence of that quarrel with Clavering, I exchanged into another regiment—the one that is quartered in this town. I am therefore living here for the present. Now tell me, will you—will you," he earnestly asked, "let me see you again? Stay—do not interrupt me—I will tell you at once exactly what I mean. I feel interested in you—I told you so before—nor is it to be wondered at after the little scene which made us acquainted——besides, I have heard enough of you to increase that interest. Now pray hear me! Not for worlds would I offend you! Has my conduct been such as to make you afraid of me?"

"No, Mr. Quentin—no," I said; "but I cannot blind myself to the fact that I—a menial—a poor humble girl—am standing here in a public place conversing with *you*, so infinitely above me!"

"And therefore you will consent to see me again and in some spot where we may converse more at our ease?" he immediately replied: "for I declare to you that whatever words you hear from my lips, shall be those of friendship—or such as a brother might speak to a sister. I have rich relations—I have wealthy friends—many of whom are married; and I will write to them telling them all I know concerning you—how I fell in with you—everything, in fine—and I will ask them to give you a situation where you shall be kindly treated."

"Again and again, Mr. Quentin," I said, deeply moved, "do I thank you: but you know that I dare not accept this kindness at your hands! You ere now said that you would speak to me as a brother would speak to a sister. Ah! sir, if then you would treat me with the same generosity and forbearance that you would wish shown to a loved sister, you will at once let me leave you here—and when we meet again you will not know me—you

will pass me by——Otherwise, the very friendship with which you are disposed to honour me, would prove most ruinous to my prospects."

Having thus spoken, I turned away and hurried along without daring to look behind. Every instant I fancied that I should hear footsteps in pursuit. But, no—I was suffered to depart without any farther attempt to detain me: and then—such is the perversity, such the weakness, such the wilfulness of the human heart!—because what I first feared did *not* happen, I felt dispirited and downcast. Methought, in the depths of my soul, that if Mr. Quentin had really been so much interested in me, he would not have suffered me thus to depart without at least one more effort to detain me!

But as I found myself giving way to these reflections, I became grieved and astonished at my own weakness; and summoning all my moral energy to my aid, I began to think of the many excellent precepts and admirable lessons which my dear mother had taught me. Yet these were scarcely powerful enough, with all their holy influence, to restore my mind to a proper temper: for in the midst of those thoughts, which I endeavoured to render as serious, as chastening, and as moralizing as possible, would intrude the image of that handsome elegant young man, risking his life on my account; and when fancy depicted him pale, ill, and wounded—with his arm in a sling—and all for me, the humble nurse-maid—I felt my heart yielding to the tenderest emotions.

Indeed, such was the agitated condition of my feelings that I dared not immediately retrace my way homeward, but sought some place where I might sit down—escape from the gaze of those who were lounging about—and indulge in the luxury of unseen tears. Dover harbour was being repaired at the time; and on the quays immense masses of granite were piled about. Penetrating amidst these heaped-up blocks of stone, I soon found a sort of nook where I could sit down and compose myself ere I returned to the house. I fell into a deep reverie, pursuing the same current of thoughts which I have just been sketching until I became aware that there were voices speaking near me. My reverie had assumed that dreamy abstraction which held my senses partially enthralled, while my ears still caught the words that were being uttered close by; and thus I became as it were an involuntary listener—or to speak more plainly, gradually found myself listening without the intent to do so.

"I tell you that money you must give me, and money I will have," said a female voice in angry tones. "Do you think I can keep these two children on the beggarly pittance you have been allowing me? No such thing. What's the use of a pound a month—a miserable five shillings a-week, to support those two bouncing boys who have now got appetites as good as my own? I tell you I can't do it; and if you don't chose to behave more liberally, I'll go to the house and make a fine piece of work."

"Hush, hush!" said a man's voice, but so low that I could not catch the words that followed, though he spoke earnestly for upwards of a minute.

"Talk of your respectability indeed!" exclaimed the female, more angrily than at first: "why should I have any regard for *your* respectability, when you had none for *mine?* Was I not a good and virtuous girl when I first came into your house? and did you not ruin me? Ah! I know what you would say! You would tell me that you did your best for me—that you provided me a comfortable lodging—paid the doctor and the nurse—and helped me all through my confinement. But why make a merit of that? You only did your duty: you seduced me, and the child is your own. Ah! fool that I was," she added bitterly, "to let the fatal connexion ever be renewed! But when I got again into a respectable place, did you not find me out?—did you not lead me a second time into error?—and now here am I, with two children dependant on me——*your* children!" she added with passionate vehemence.

I was now thoroughly awakened to the consciousness that a discourse of a private and delicate nature was going on behind the very heap of stones where I was seated; and I was about to steal away, when the male voice spoke again—and this time loud enough for me not only to hear it fully, but also to recognise it instantaneously. Heavens! it was my master, Mr. Messiter, who thus spoke: and seized with a consternation, I remained nailed to the spot.

"All this is very well and very true," he said, in accents half-threatening and half-coaxing; "but if you have had your troubles in consequence of our connexion, I have had mine. Did not my wife find it out? does she not know everything? Yes—even to the very fact that I allow you twelve pounds a-year for the maintenance of your children?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the woman, with taunting bitterness; "much you care for your wife indeed! Poor thing! as one of her own sex I can't help pitying her. She does not even dare look at you in a manner to reproach you with your infidelities: she has not even the satisfaction—if satisfaction it is—of upbraiding you for your conduct. No—she is compelled to submit and endure it all patiently. But I tell you what, Mr. Messiter—you shan't treat me in the same heartless and tyrannical fashion! The children I have are *your* children, as true as there is a God above us—and you know it too. Therefore you *shall* do something more for them! I don't want to be unreasonable—I have no objection to work—and God knows I ply my needle from morning to night when I can get work to do. But of late I have lost many good patrons, and all on account of that mock sanctity which you yourself help to keep up in this town. Families find out that I have gone astray in my life—that I am *not* a widow as I have pretended; and they refuse me work. Nay, some have spurned me from their doors. But I can't see my children starve: and now you know why I sent round to you just now so urgent a message to meet me this forenoon."

"Well, Margaret," said Mr. Messiter, after a long silence, "I really don't know what to do for you. Business is very bad—competition is ruining all us shopkeepers——"

"Oh! yes—you are just the man to be ruined!" exclaimed his victim with a mocking laugh. "Not so long as you have got a cupboard full of all sorts of abominations and devilries to put into your goods! Come, don't look in that manner at me: you know very well I found out the secret of that

precious cupboard of your's. Ah! ah!" she continued with a chuckle that it did me harm to hear, grating on my nerves as if there were something satanic in that mirth,—"do you still keep up your old tricks—devote the wet Sunday mornings to communing with yourself in the solitude of your shop?" —and here she imitated, certainly in an admirable manner, the cold sanctimonious voice in which Mr. Messiter was wont to speak on ordinary occasions.

"Margaret, what in the world makes you so bitter against me to-day?" he asked, his accents showing that he was frightened.

"Bitter indeed!" she cried: and her voice grew more bitter as she continued speaking. "What! do you think I love you? No, no—I might have liked you once—but I hate you—yes, hate you *now*, because you are heartless, vile, mean, and unprincipled to a degree,—so that no one who knows you well can do otherwise than hate you. But even while hating you, yet by some strange feeling—I can't account for it—I am jealous!"

"Jealous!" ejaculated Messiter, in a tone of astonishment.

"Yes—jealous," repeated the woman emphatically: "but not of your poor wife! No, no," she added with an ironical laugh: "I am not jealous of her—for I know full well that no eastern slave has less power in her household or enjoys less of her lord and master's confidence and love than your wife. But there is one beneath your roof—— Ah! now you start—and you look guilty!"

"By heaven—I swear," exclaimed Mr. Messiter, "that Mary Price is an angel of virtue so far as I am concerned!"

"Well, but if you have left her unpersecuted hitherto," observed the woman, "it is not that you mean to suffer her to escape you. For the first few months that I was in your service, nothing could be more correct than your deportment towards me—until one day—I recollect it full well —you tapped my cheek with a sort of parentally caressing good humour; and from that moment did you weave the web around me—gradually and slowly, it is true—but not the less surely—and I suppose you intend to do the same with this Mary Price. But let me tell you that if you don't get rid of the girl in the first place, and give me some money in the second place, I will bring the whole town about your ears."

"Come, listen to reason, Margaret," said Mr. Messiter coaxingly. "Promise me not to interfere with my domestic arrangements in any way, and I will give you five pounds now and increase your monthly money to twenty-five shillings."

"Well," said the woman, evidently much mollified by this proposition, "I do not wish to create any disturbance——"

"See! here is the bank-note," said Messiter; "and now mind the solemn undertaking is——"

"That I let you alone, even to the leaving you in unmolested possession of your pretty Mary Price. There is an old proverb about one's necessities consenting before one's will——However," she abruptly exclaimed, "give me the money and let me depart."

"Good bye, Margaret," said Mr. Messiter. "You are really looking very well to-day, and the sea-breeze has given you quite a colour. Come, just one kiss——"

"No, not one!" cried the woman: "for I hate you!"

This bitter exclamation was followed by the rustling of garments and the quick retreat of footsteps; and then, after a brief pause, I heard the heavier tread of Mr. Messiter as he also took his departure.

Fortunate was it for me that the baby remained fast asleep during the whole time. I thus sat impaled as it were by the spell which retained me fast in statue-like immovability. But the reader may probably be enabled to picture to himself the burning indignation which I experienced when I heard my own name introduced into that precious colloquy. Every vein tingled throughout my frame even to the very tips of my fingers; and I know not how it was that I continued silent and motionless where I was, instead of bursting from my hiding-place, confronting the pair, and bidding them refrain from any farther allusion to me. But perhaps it was that even while feeling myself so deeply aggrieved, I did not choose to stand forth as an eaves-dropper—and moreover, above all other feelings and considerations, was the stupor of astonishment that sat like a spell upon me.

Fully and completely was Mr. Messiter's character now unmasked; and all my previous suspicions concerning him were more than justified. His wife, poor creature! was no stranger to the full extent of his wickedness; and my heart bled for her when I remembered in what piteous accents and with what a look of wretchedness she had observed to me some weeks back, that evil-disposed or thoughtless girls, by permitting their masters to take liberties with them, were the cause of endless miseries in families. Alas, poor woman! she was telling me at the time her own history!

For upwards of a quarter of an hour did I remain seated amidst the huge granite stones, pondering over all that I had just heard, and debating within myself what I ought to do. To return to the house and insist upon leaving immediately, would be to entail upon myself the necessity of giving the reason for such precipitate conduct; and though I would mercilessly have told the whole truth to Messiter, and boldly have avowed that accident had rendered me acquainted with the full measure of his iniquities, yet I hesitated to take any step calculated to inflict another stab upon the already too deeply wounded heart of his wife. I therefore decided upon waiting till my month was up; for I had already given warning on the previous day to leave at the expiration of the four weeks.

Having come to this resolve, I slowly retraced my way to the house, which I reached just as Mr. Messiter and the two shopmen were sitting down to dinner. I ascended to the nursery; and having laid aside my walking-dress, sat down to give the baby his food. Presently the bell rang as a signal for me to descend into the parlour and have my dinner: but Mrs. Messiter and the five eldest children being absent, I did not choose to incur the chance of finding myself alone with my master after all I had so recently overheard. Again did the bell ring at the expiration of about five minutes; and fearful of provoking words, I went out upon the landing and asked, "Do you want me, sir?"

"Yes, Mary: come down to your dinner," was the reply given in Mr. Messiter's cold hard voice.

"I do not want any, I thank you, sir," was my response.

"Come down, I say!" he exclaimed, evidently a little excited.

Taking the baby in my arms, I descended to the parlour: for of course I could not disobey without coming to an open rupture at once—and *this*, for Mrs. Messiter's sake, as I before said, I was most anxious to avoid. But on entering the room, I threw a quick glance around; and perceiving that Mr. Smithson and the younger shopman had gone down stairs and that I was really alone with my master, I stopped short just within the threshold.

"Mary," said Mr. Messiter, "come in and have your dinner. I don't like any servants of mine to go without their regular meals; for when they get gossiping with other servants, they go and declare they are half-starved, and so on."

"I am not in the habit of gossiping, sir," was my answer, delivered firmly but respectfully; "and I cannot eat anything at this moment."

"Stop, Mary!" said Mr. Messiter, as I was about to withdraw. "I——I——really think, Mary,"—and he stammered and hesitated in much confusion,—"that this dear child is not looking quite so well as he was:"—and thus speaking, he advanced close up to me—then pretending to look down into the baby's face, he at the same time gave me a look so full of impudent meaning that I instantaneously drew back, flung upon him a glance of burning indignation, and turning abruptly round, quitted the room.

"Mary," he exclaimed, "come back, I say! Why do you run off like this? I insist upon your coming back."

But I would not heed him; and ascending to the nursery, locked myself in. There I remained for several hours, giving way to the various reflections which my position in all respects was so likely to conjure up. At length I was aroused from my reverie by a knock at the door; and Betsy's voice immediately was heard informing me that tea was ready.

It was now seven o'clock in the evening. I had taken nothing since eight in the morning, and therefore felt faint and exhausted. I asked her if she could not bring me up my tea. She replied that she dared not—that I knew very well the arrangement was for me to take my meals down in the parlour, after my master and mistress; and she inquired why I did not descend now.

"Because," was my immediate answer, "I do not choose to be left alone with Mr. Messiter."

Betsy looked at me with amazement: for she had not been long in the Messiters' service, and was totally unacquainted with her master's proceedings.

"I dare say you are astonished, Betsy," said I, "at the answer I have just given you: but it is nevertheless the truth. Do not however say a word to our poor mistress—for I believe she is already afflicted enough."

"I wouldn't make mischief for all the world," returned the good-hearted Betsy; "and this you know full well. But you needn't be afraid of master's troubling you in the parlour; for he's gone down into the shop, and is as busy as possible serving customers. Besides, if you like I'll be upon the look-out; and if he comes up into the parlour, I'll come up also, and pretend to have something to do—cleaning the windows, or what not."

I thanked Betsy for her kindness, and no longer hesitated to descend to the parlour in order to partake of the refreshment whereof I stood so much in need. But I had not been many minutes seated at the tea-table, when I heard a knock at the street-door. It was not a single one—nor yet exactly a double one—but something between the two; and I do not know how it was, unless it were that I was low-spirited and prone to misgiving, but sure enough that knock struck me as being of a suspicious character. I heard Betsy go and answer it: then she went into the shop—then she returned to the street-door again—and then I heard heavy footsteps enter the passage below.

"Wait here a moment," exclaimed Betsy: and hurrying up stairs, she came into the parlour, advanced straight up to me, and said in a low mysterious voice, "There are two such queer-looking characters just come to see master—I don't like them at all by their looks—and I don't think that he was over well pleased when I went into the shop and told him that two men from Ashford——"

"Two men from Ashford?" said I, an ice-chill suddenly seizing upon me and penetrating to the very marrow of my bones.

"Yes—but how ill you look?" said Betsy, surveying me attentively.

"No—it is nothing," I observed, scarcely knowing what I said. "But those men——"

"Master told me I was to show them up-stairs and he would be with them directly. I suppose I must show them in here, as there is no fire in the back parlour. Will you go in there and finish your tea?"

Thus speaking, and without giving me time to utter another word, Betsy snatched up the tea-tray and carried it into the adjacent parlour,—I following mechanically with a candle in my hand. Then, having thus suddenly and hastily made me shift my quarters, Betsy closed the door upon me—sped down stairs again—and re-ascended with the two visitors from Ashford.

Having shown them into the front parlour, she withdrew: and the moment they were alone together, a deep ominous ruffian voice said, with a coarse chuckle, "Well, Nick, I'm blowed if our customer Messiter hasn't got a devilish fine establishment."

"Ah! and not a little through our help too, Ben," replied Sawbridge: for he and the Bulldog were indeed the two visitors in the front parlour.

"Yes—no doubt on't," responded the more desperate villain of the two. "A man may save a deal of money by selling our stuff for pure Mocha coffee:"—and here the fellow gave another coarse laugh. "But I say, Nick," he almost immediately continued, "it's here—isn't it—that Robert's pretty sister is in service?"

"Why, you know it is as well as I can tell you," replied Sawbridge. "But hush! the old fellow is coming. Now mind—stand firm——"

"Trust me," growled the Bulldog: and then a silence prevailed in the front parlour, while Mr. Messiter's footsteps were heard ascending the stairs.

But here I must pause for a few moments to inform the reader that the back parlour, where I was now seated, was only separated from the front by a thin partition, and that whatever took place in one room was plainly audible in the other. Of

course, when Betsy had hurried me from the front into the back parlour, she had not the slightest idea of placing me in the position of a listener. The fact that I should be so placed by being in that inner room, could not have occurred to her in the hurry she was in to get the front parlour cleared for the visitors; and I can solemnly declare that when I so quickly, and indeed so mechanically, followed her suggestion of changing into the back-room, it did not for a moment occur to me that I should become an eaves-dropper for the second time on this important day. Such was however the fact: for no sooner was I installed in the back-room and the visitors were introduced into the front, when those ominous voices reached my ears, confirming my previous suspicion as to who *the men from Ashford* were. Then again was I transfixed to my seat—again was I rendered statue-like and motionless, an insuperable spell being upon me and compelling me to remain there to listen, whether I would or not!"

Mr. Messiter entered the parlour, and I heard him close the door carefully behind him. Then, almost immediately afterwards, he said in his cold, measured, and apparently passionless voice, "What is the business on which you desire to speak with me?"

"By your leave, sir, we will sit down," answered the Bulldog: "for sitting is as cheap as standing—leastways, it is so at Ashford, and I don't see why it shouldn't be the same at Dover."

"Well, sit down then, if you will," said Mr. Messiter: "but make haste and tell me your business. The message my servant delivered to me in the shop was that it is of a very private character."

"And don't you think it must be so, after all the dealings you and us have had together for

the last five or six years?" exclaimed Nick Sawbridge.

"But I thought that your way of doing business," observed Mr. Messiter, "was never to go near where your customers dwelt?"

"Ah! that's our reg'lar rule," said the Bulldog: "but all rules has their exceptions—and this present visit of our'n is one."

"But in what way?" asked Mr. Messiter, now growing somewhat impatient—or, I should rather say, *uneasy*, judging by the altering tone of his voice. "If I had wanted any more of the stuff at present, I should have written to let you know: but as you are well aware that I cannot use too much of it at a time——"

"We know that deuced well," interrupted the Bulldog gruffly; "and it's because we don't sell enough of the stuff to our different customers, and also because we are paid so very little for it, that we now and then run precious short of cash——"

"On which occasions," observed Nick Sawbridge, taking up the thread of the discourse, "we make a cast upon one of our customers, quite promiscuous, and without no intention of showing any pertickler faviour to the rest——"

"What *am* I to understand by *all* this?" interrupted Mr. Messiter, evidently with increasing uneasiness.

"You are just to understand that we want a few yaller boys," returned the Bulldog; "and we thought it was worth while to take the outside of the coach and come over to ask you to advance them."

"Advance you money!" cried Mr. Messiter, in accents betokening dismay.

"To be sure—and why not?" demanded the Bulldog.

"Aye—why not indeed?" echoed Sawbridge. "You can take it out in stuff——"

"Well, as far as a guinea or two will serve you," said Mr. Messiter, "I have no objection——"

"A guinea or two!" exclaimed the Bulldog with ruffian ferocity. "We want a matter of twenty."

"Twenty guineas!" cried Messiter. "Impossible—ridiculous! I shall not use twenty guineas' worth of your stuff in the next ten years. Why, it is only twelve shillings the large box full?"

"Come, let's understand each other," said the Bulldog with brutal bluntness. "It isn't what you like or what you don't like—or how much stuff you will use or how much you won't: but the thing is that me and my friend here want twenty guineas wery pertickler, and we don't mean to leave this house without having 'em."

"And suppose," said Mr. Messiter, in a voice that now trembled audibly, "I send for the constable and give you into charge—what then?"

"Why, you won't do any such thing, Mr. Messiter," replied the Bulldog. "It would ruin your business if you did. When you put your shutters up to-night, you might leave them there for good—as I'm blowed if there would be any use in ever taking them down again! I say, Nick, wouldn't it be a lark?" continued the Bulldog, with one of his dreadful chuckles. "Suppose friend Messiter here has us up before the beak for extortion or what not? Then says I, 'Your worship, a'low me to explain. Please your worship, me and my friend here, which is Mr. Nicholas Sawbridge, is in partnership together as liver-bakers for grocers and coffee-dealers.'—'Liver-bakers!' his worship will cry out: 'and what does that mean?'—'Why, your worship,' I goes on to explain, 'we buys up the diseased livers of cattle and horses; all the livers for instance belonging to the horses which goes to the knacker's yard; and we wouldn't even be particular about a dead man's liver. Liver it is we wants, and we don't care whose or what liver it is, so long as liver we gets.'—Well then, the old beak will look over his spectacles in astonishment, while I goes on to say, 'To be sure, your worship, me and Mr. Sawbridge is liver-bakers; that is, we bake livers, grind 'em up into powder very fine indeed, and sell the *stuff*, as we calls it, to the retail tea-dealers and grocers to mix in their coffee; and as it only stands them in twopence a pound, and they can mix at least an ounce of the *stuff* to thirteen ounces of chicory and two of real coffee, making up the whole sixteen ounces, or a pound, which they sells for——"

"Come, enough of all this!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Messiter, who, I suppose, was wrapped in his reflections while the Bulldog, in an ironical style, delivered himself of this long tirade—a tirade, however, which revealed to *me* all the horror and revolting monstrosity of that mysterious traffic which he and his comrade pursued. "What is the use of entering into such a strain of talk as this?" continued Mr. Messiter: "it will not intimidate me—and therefore I tell you *that* plain enough. If you do not depart I will give you into custody; and if you were to make such an accusation against me, it would be looked upon as preposterous to a degree. Indeed, who would believe such a thing in regard to a respectable tradesman of my standing? Now, if I condescend to enter even for a moment upon this discussion with you," added Mr. Messiter, his voice having regained all its wonted sternness and severity, "it is only to show in what an awkward position you are likely to place yourselves."

"Then you mean to say you refuse?" observed the Bulldog, in a voice so full of savage ferociousness that it made me shudder although out of sight of the ruffian.

"I mean to say that I do," answered Messiter. "I am not going to be bullied by you."

"Very well then," said the Bulldog. "Come along, Nick: we shall know what to do."

"Now mark," said Messiter, evidently gaining courage just in proportion as he saw that his two visitors were growing crest-fallen: "if you make the slightest disturbance, or give utterance to a hostile word as you go down stairs, or when you get out into the street, I will at once call for the constables. But if you will depart quietly and tranquilly, you may rely upon finding a letter containing two guineas at the Ashford Post Office the day after to-morrow."

"Give us the two guineas now, and we will be off," said the Bulldog, in a tone that resembled the subdued growl of a wild beast.

There was a pause of about half a minute, during which I suppose that Mr. Messiter was deliberating what course he should pursue.

"Here's a guinea then," he at length said; "and now if you go away quietly you will find the other at Ashford, as I have promised you."

The two men said no more, but took their de-

parlure, Mr. Messiter conducting them down to the street-door; and they went away without creating any disturbance.

I sped up to the nursery, well provided, heaven knows, with fresh food for reflection. The whole truth concerning those dreadful men was now revealed; and anything more hideous than their traffic could not well be conceived. That they carried it on extensively too, was very certain; and thus the rumour which had long been current; to the effect that many respectable persons held intercourse with them, received its full corroboration. But again I say, what a hideous traffic, and how loathsomely disgusting the abominations which they were the means of enabling fraudulent tradesmen to commingle with one of the most common articles of consumption! The idea that the diseased livers even of horses slaughtered in the knackers' yards, should by such a sophisticated process be converted into a substitute for the fragrant berry of Arabia! Then, considering also the insight which I had previously obtained into Mr. Messiter's way of adulterating his goods, what other conclusion could I possibly come to than that he was a living lie—a walking cheat?

There are many other inferences to be drawn from the facts I am now relating—inferences which tend to show how demoralizing must be the habit of adulteration and sophistication practised, I fear, by a very large number of tradesmen. Breaking down all the barriers which separate the individual from the paths of duplicity, deception, knavery, and fraud, how can such proceedings be otherwise than most depraving in their influences? But to think that such men as this Mr. Messiter should practise these robberies and rascalities, and then walk boldly with head erect through the streets, looking their fellow-men in the face—or else slide along the pavement, with prim puritanical air, to church on Sunday, and there perhaps (with the Pharisee) thank God "that they are not as other men are"—Oh! it is all this that constitutes the crowning wonder and the ineffable hypocrisy!

But to continue. Shortly after those dreadful men from Ashford had taken their leave, Mrs. Messiter and the five eldest children returned from their aunt's house; and as the little folks were very tired, I put them all to bed earlier than usual. Then, being myself fatigued and worn out with the excitement of this day of many incidents, I also was glad to seek my couch soon after nine o'clock.

CHAPTER XII.

A NIGHT OF HORROR.

Wearied though I was, I could not immediately go to sleep, but lay thinking on all that had occurred since the morning—my interview with Mr. Eustace Quentin, the colloquy I had overheard while seated amongst the granite stones on the wharf, Mr. Messiter's conduct towards me when he summoned me down to dinner, and lastly the visit of those two men of whom I could never think without a cold shudder—aye, and also a sigh as I thought of my unfortunate brother Robert.

I lay awake, then, reflecting upon these things for upwards of an hour. I heard Mr. Smithson and the other shopman ascend to the attic which they occupied above the nursery where I slept with the youngest children. Soon afterwards I heard Betsy go up to the other attic at the top of the house; and at length the slow measured steps of Mr. Messiter, accompanied by the lighter tread of his wife, met my ears as they ascended to their chamber, the door of which faced the nursery. Then the house became all quiet; and I gradually sank into the arms of slumber.

I know not how long I had slept, nor can I tell what it was that awoke me; but sure and certain enough is it, that I suddenly started up from the midst of a very unpleasant dream, in which the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge were playing the principal part. Such was the horror which that nightmare had left upon me, that I felt myself bathed in a cold perspiration, and could hear quite plainly the beatings of my heart. The room being pitch dark, and the sensation of terror thus holding me in its grasp as I sprang up in the bed to complete wakefulness, I could not immediately persuade myself that it was merely a dream, but listened with suspended breath to catch a repetition of those sounds which in my vision I had heard, or fancied to have heard. Yes—sure enough there *was* a noise that sent a fresh thrill of indescribable horror throughout my entire frame! It was a noise as of a tampering with a lock—as if indeed some one was trying to force open a door with a rusty key, or with a key not belonging to it. All in a moment the affair of the burglary at Twisden Lodge came flashing back to my recollection, and the dread thought instantaneously sprang up in my mind, that there were burglars now in Mr. Messiter's house!

Suddenly I felt myself armed with a courage and presence of mind which astonished me; and getting out of bed, I gently—indeed noiselessly—opened the door and listened. All was then quiet. Still I listened, remaining with the door ajar for upwards of a minute—and not a sound was heard in the house. Nevertheless, so convinced was I that I *had* heard the noise which I have described, that I could not possibly feel re-assured merely because I heard those sounds no longer. Nor could I retire to rest again without doing something to clear up all doubts, or rather to satisfy myself that my belief was a groundless one. In a word, I had a presentiment that there were burglars in the house; and I therefore thought it necessary to act upon this impression.

Hastily slipping on a few clothes, I struck a light; and taking the candle, was on the point of knocking at the door of the chamber where my master and mistress slept, when a sudden thought stayed my hand at the very instant I was about to give the warning tap. If I awoke my master, he would get up as a matter of course—he would descend to look over the house—and he would perhaps bid me accompany him, as I had a light in my hand. All this flashed to my brain in a moment; and so utterly did my mind revolt against the bare idea of finding myself *alone* with my master in any part of the house at that dead hour of the night, that I dared not arouse him. So I crept back into the nursery, sat down on the bed, and began to reflect what I should do.

To awaken the young men up-stairs was not to be

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thought of—or rather was an idea dismissed as soon as conceived; because if I aroused any one at all, whom should it be but my master? Again I took the light and went forth into the passage. All was still: the silence of death seemed to prevail throughout the house. Nearly ten minutes had now elapsed since I first heard the noise; and as it was not repeated, I really began to think that it could only have been fancy after all.

This belief now gained upon me; and I was more than half inclined to retire to rest. The children were sleeping soundly. Poor innocents! they were well worn out with the day's pleasure they had enjoyed at their aunt's: for if pleasure fatigues those who are accustomed to it, how much more wearying and exhausting is its excitement to those who are permitted to indulge in it only at long, long intervals! Everybody now seemed sleeping in the house, save myself: and wherefore should I remain away from my bed any longer? I was about to lay aside my apparel and retire to rest again, when all my terrors sprang up with renewed force and the presentiment of danger struck upon my heart so violently that it really seemed as if a voice whispered in my ears, "There *are* thieves in the house!"

I now felt that it was absolutely impossible to lie down again, or even to extinguish the light, until re-assured with regard to my fears. But still I experienced an insuperable repugnance, which no doubt all the readers of my own sex will full well understand, to arouse my master and incur the chance of having to accompany him about the house. Under *any* circumstances it would have been repugnant to my delicacy; but now, after all I had heard amidst the granite stones on the wharf, and remembering his conduct to me after dinner, I could not possibly conquer that loathing, even though it were to save the premises from being robbed, or burnt over our heads.

Under all these circumstances I formed the resolve of stealing down stairs alone, and clearing up all uncertainty. The night was very cold, this being in the month of February, and a sharp easterly wind blowing from the sea; so that I threw a shawl over my shoulders. I had slipped on my gown, my shoes, and stockings, and had bound my hair hastily round my head. I mention all these particulars on account of what is to follow.

Thus slightly attired, but with a thick shawl defending me against the cold, I stole forth and began descending the stairs. The light which I carried in my hand threw such sinister-looking shadows on the wall, that I more than once turned my head with a sudden tremor, to assure myself that no one was behind me. The stairs creaked, and then my blood appeared to course with a tingling sensation and with maddening quickness in its channels—but only to be struck stagnant in the ice-chilled veins the next moment, as those shadows on the wall impaled me with horror. Still I went on descending the flight, and reached the landing whence the parlours opened. Both doors were shut; and if any lock had been tried at all, it was assuredly one of these the noise of which had reached my ears. For here I should observe that every door was carefully locked by Mr. Messiter himself ere he retired to rest.

Pausing on that landing, I listened with suspended breath. Suspended breath indeed! I felt as if there were no longer any breath in my body, but that I was an animated statue, so cold at that moment was I. And let not the readers suppose that this consecutive train of sensations, emotions, and feelings, is being exaggerated or wrought up to a high pitch for the sake of dramatic effect; but rather let the said readers, especially if females, endeavour for a moment to put themselves in my position—having fresh in my mind all the terror left there by the visit of the two dreadful characters from Ashford—remembering also the burglary at Twisden Lodge—and now wandering alone in a large house which a dread presentiment had already peopled with burglars—let all these circumstances be taken into consideration, and the poignancy of my alarms at one moment, and the death-like chill which palsied me at another, may full easily be comprehended.

Well, there I was, now listening with suspended breath upon the landing. But all was still—and a stupendous silence appeared to entomb me. I approached the front parlour door: I grasped the handle—it turned—and the door gave way. It was, then, open: and as this circumstance at once struck me as a corroboration of my worst terrors and that there *were* burglars in the house, I was about to send forth a cry of alarm, when a powerful arm was suddenly passed over my shoulder from behind—a hand gagged my mouth—another grasped the candle which in my sudden terror I was just letting fall—and thus all in a moment, without even time to utter a cry or move a limb, was I made captive. At the same instant my looks encountered those of Nick Sawbridge, who was the one that caught the falling candle; while dread instinct made me aware that it was the Bulldog, who, having seized on me behind, had enfolded me in his vice-like grasp. An awful consternation fell upon me and I became senseless.

When I awoke to consciousness again, I at once became aware that I was being hurried swiftly along out-of-doors through the streets. A mortal terror seized upon me again—and again did I lose all consciousness. Awakening to life a second time, I felt the night air strike chill to my very heart's core; and I still found that I was being borne swiftly along in the arms of two men. Though utter darkness enveloped me, yet could I doubt who those two men were?—and the gasping sounds which my throat sent forth as the horrible conviction settled itself on me that I was in the power of these dreadful characters, made them aware that I had once more returned to consciousness.

"If you dare cry or scream we will blow your brains out," said the Bulldog: and terrible as was his voice at all times to hear, it now smote upon me with the awfulness of death itself.

"For heaven's sake have mercy upon me," I murmured in a dying tone. "What harm have I done you?"

"Never do you mind *that*," was the gruff reply, the Bulldog still speaking. "Now then, if you can walk we will put you on your legs; but you had better mind how you break away from us—for we are now upon the cliffs, and with a false step over you go."

I shuddered, with such a shuddering as never convulsed my frame before or since: and now as

the moon suddenly broke from behind a dark cloud, I cast my eyes wildly around and instantaneously embraced a sufficiency of the features of the scene to know where I was

From the lower part of Dover there is a rapid ascent upon the cliffs which beetle above the sea on the one side, and expand out into vast undulations inland. Rising thus amphitheatrically, there is a place where the acclivity takes a more abrupt ascent still, and slanting steeply upwards, forms that colossus of those heights known as Shakspeare's Cliff. It was here that these two men were pursuing their way, dragging me betwixt them.

That the entire scene and all the features of the locality were well known to them, was evident by the manner in which they had sped along in the darkness: for strangers in that spot would have stood frightful chances of falling over, down the steep front of the cliffs into the sea, which was dashing against the base, where at high water the waves expend their violence at the very foot of those precipitate heights. Indeed, as the moon thus suddenly broke forth, illumining the scene and flinging its rays, fitful and wild, from amidst the storm-clouds, it appeared that we must have been for some minutes almost skirting the edge of the precipice. No wonder, then, that so awful a shudder swept over me as the tremendous horrors of my position thus suddenly burst upon my view!

Terror now sealed my lips: but still my mind had a horrible clearness, and a myriad memories appeared to sweep through it with lightning velocity. I thought of my lost parents—my brothers and sisters—all, every thing, that was near or dear to me or in any way connected with me either painfully or pleasurably. But in the midst of these wild yet vivid recollections, there went up from the depths of my soul a fervid prayer to the Almighty, that if it should please him to suffer my own life to be immolated to the rage of these barbarians, yet that his all-shielding influence might not be withdrawn from those beloved ones whom I should leave behind me.

"Whereabouts?" suddenly demanded Nick Sawbridge of his companion.

"Right up a-top," was the prompt reply: and the question and answer smote upon my heart with a dread forcefulness, as if the query had been where my murder was to take place and the reply given accordingly.

Murder! O if I shudder *now* as I write the word and think of all I suffered on that tremendous night, what must have been my feelings *then* as I felt confident that murder was about to be done and that I was to be the victim?

Rapidly up the ascent of Shakspeare's Cliff the ruffians sped, dragging me between them; and still the moon kept shining down upon us. At length we reached the highest point of that acclivitous rock; and suddenly the men paused within two yards of the verge of the precipice. It was on the peak, as I may describe it, of the mountain that my ruffian-persecutors thus halted.

"Now sit down a moment, Nick, or we may be observed by the spy-glasses of the coast-guard," said the Bulldog.

Accordingly they threw me flat upon the grass which clothed the sloping summit of the cliff; and both sat down by my side.

"We must wait till the moon goes in again," continued the Bulldog: but scarcely had he spoken when a dark cloud swept over the planet of the night, and sudden obscurity again enveloped us, as if a funeral pall had been all in a moment drawn over the heavens.

"Now!" said the Bulldog, starting up—an example which was instantaneously followed by his companion.

They seized upon me—they raised me in their powerful rude arms—and I felt that my last moment was come. There was a shriek of mortal agony which rose up into my very throat, but remained stifled there, as if it had encountered a wall barring its egress. I was palsied with horror—and yet consciousness was vivid within me: but I could neither afford utterance to a syllable of entreaty, nor give vent to a cry for help—no, nor move hand nor foot in a struggle to save myself. I was powerless—and every faculty of life was suspended, save the poignant feeling of life itself!

Black as pitch was the darkness which continued to envelope the whole scene; and approaching a little nearer to the edge of the precipice, the ruffians laid me flat upon the grass—then knelt down themselves—gave my convulsing form one push—and sent me over the brink.

Then was it that with the instinctive impulse of mortal agony I stretched out my hands to grasp at something—anything—and they at the instant encountered a projecting root on which my fingers fastened with the greediest avidity and the firmest tenacity. I was caught also by a jutting portion of the cliff, and thus actually was held and sustained about a couple of feet below the edge, but overhanging the tremendous gulf below.

Not a sound had escaped my lips: for my mind has a vivid recollection of every detail, even the minutest, of *this* the most fearful adventure of my life. Fortunate was it for me that consternation had thus paralyzed my tongue and suspended all power of utterance: otherwise the ruffians would have discovered what had happened—how their murderous aim was thus providentially baffled—and they would have finished their diabolical work.

As it was, they believed that the deed was done effectually and well, as will appear by the following discourse, to which I had to listen as I lay thus suspended between earth and heaven, on a little ridge so narrow that if I had not had the roots to sustain me I might have fallen over, and so short that my legs dangled down. But I should observe that this ridge jutted forth in the shape of a saddle, so that it was in the hollow thereof that I had been caught and was thus sustained.

"Now let us rest for a few minutes," said Ben Bulldog; and I heard him throw himself flat on the grass after having pushed me over. "By jingo! this is what I call excitement, Nick."

"Excitement indeed!" returned his accomplice. "But still I don't half understand why we have done this. Of course, as you said what we was to do as we hurried the gal along up to this place, it has been done; and as a matter of course there was no waiting for explanation or discussion on the point——"

"Why, what a fool you must be, Nick," interrupted the Bulldog, almost savagely, "not to understand the meaning of this here business. But come—take a drop of the bingo, and then we will

talk it over; for we must have ten minutes' rest or so before we start off homeward."

I could then tell that the two men were drinking out of a flask or some such thing, which they handed to each other; and when they had each taken two or three draughts in turn, they resumed their discourse.

"Now don't you see how the affair will work?" said the Bulldog. "Messiter comes down in the morning—finds the house robbed—all the plate gone out of the parlour, and the cash taken out of the till in the shop. Well, but who could have done it? Perhaps his suspicions will at once fall on you and me: 'cause why? it happens the very night of our visit to him. But lo and behold! the young gal is missing! She's gone—fled—bolted. Then she's the thief! Isn't it as clear as daylight, Nick?"

"To be sure," was Sawbridge's reply. "I see it now plain enough."

"Yes—and so there won't be no necessity for us to play at hide and seek, and all that kind of nonsense," continued the Bulldog. "We shall tramp back to Ashford to-night—hide the swag for a little time till the whole thing is blowed over—and then one of us will pop up to London and sell it as we did the things we got from Twisden Lodge."

Here was a new revelation for me! 'Twas the revelation, too, of something which had never struck me before; for not once during the two months and upwards which had elapsed since the burglary at the Lodge, had it struck me to attribute it to these ruffians. But, good heavens! what a suspicion now flashed to my mind:—and even as I lay upon that narrow ledge of rock, suspended between earth and heaven—or rather with the wild sea deep down below and the sable clouds floating high above—I felt myself writhing with the ineffable anguish produced by that suspicion which had thus suddenly started up in my mind. An ejaculation too of agony rose to the very tip of my tongue, and was only caught back as it were by the quick consciousness that were I thus to betray my position to the murderous villains near me, my doom would be completely sealed.

"But why the deuce," demanded Nick Sawbridge in continuation, "did you take it into your head to bring the gal all the way up here, just to have the amusement of shoving her over Shakespeare's Cliff?"

"Why, don't you see," replied Ben Bulldog, "it was necessary that the gal should be disposed of altogether—put clean out of the way—so that she might never turn up no more; 'cause why, such a total disappearance on her part corroborates the suspicion that 'twas her who robbed the house and bolted with the swag. If we had pitched her into the harbour, her body would be found; and if we had tumbled her off any other part of the cliffs, she would have fallen on the beach and also be found—in which case, as no plate nor nothing would be discovered on her, it would look like a clear case of murder. *Now* don't you see, Nick, why I thought it best we should take the trouble to bring her here? 'cause why you knows as well as me that anything pitched over from the peak of old Shakespeare falls bang down into the sea; and with the ebbing tide presently the corpse of the young gal will be carried right down the Channel and never be seen or heard of no more."

"I understand it all now," said Nick Sawbridge, "and must confess you are one of the downiest coves in all England. But I say, suppose young Bob should hear of this business of his sister's disappearance?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the Bulldog savagely. "In the first place he don't know we have come to Dover at all; and so he can't suspect we had anything to do in this night's crack at Messiter's house. In the second place, even if he did suspect, you don't think he cares two raps about that sister of his'n? So far from that, I don't think he would at all mind knowing that we had put her out of the way. Besides, we've got such a hold on him in different ways it isn't likely he will seek any opportunity to quarrel with us; and if he does," added the Bulldog, with a chuckle, "we can do without him as we used to do before he was one of us."

"Oh! to be sure," observed Nick: "only as he's a sharp kind of a chap and isn't particular to a shade or two, we might make him very useful in course of time; and therefore I don't want to quarrel with him."

"There ain't no chance of quarrelling with him, I can tell you," rejoined the Bulldog. "But I say," he added, with one of those coarse laughs that grated horribly upon the ears, like the sawing of iron,—"how capital all the different circumstances of this night's business has turned out for us! In the first place, wasn't it fortunate we thought of opening that there cupboard on the landing, although we found nothing there but old Messiter's traps for adulteration——"

"Fortunate indeed," added Nick Sawbridge, "since it served as a hiding-place for us while we heard that girl moving about up-stairs and then coming down to search the house. But I raly thought at one time she meant to alarm her master and all the rest."

"Yes—and you wanted to be off at once," observed the Bulldog: "but I would insist on lying still in that cupboard, just to listen to what was going on. For if we *had* heard the gal knocking at the room-doors up-stairs, it would then have been time to bolt. So you see everything has turned out for the best; and here we've got a matter of five pound in money, plate that will produce us at least a twenty-pound note, and no chance of getting into any trouble on account of the business. In fact, I don't see," added the Bulldog, "how Messiter will ever suspect us when once he finds that Mary Price is missing."

In this strain did the two men continue to talk for a few minutes longer, their discourse lasting perhaps altogether a quarter of an hour after I had been thrown over the cliff. They now took each another dram of brandy, and then decided upon commencing their march to Ashford. Meanwhile the moon had remained concealed behind the black clouds that floated upon heaven's face; and I blessed—Oh! I blessed that darkness which by thus deeply shrouding me, prevented those miscreants from observing how signally their murderous plan had failed and how wonderfully Providence had interposed to rescue me from death.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE INCIDENTS OF A MONTH.

It would be impossible to describe the feelings of relief with which I heard Ben Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge take their departure: but ere I made the slightest attempt to release myself from that appalling position in which I was placed, I suffered at least another five minutes to elapse, so as to make sure that the villains were really gone. Thus was it that altogether I remained about twenty minutes reclining in the hollow of that ledge overhanging the tremendous precipice, at the bottom of which the sea was beating with sullen moans and heavy plashes. Only conceive, twenty minutes in that fearful predicament! It was an age: for feelings so varied and emotions so conflicting that would suffice for the narrative of centuries, were comprised with all the condensation of their poignancies in that interval of twenty minutes. It was an interval filled with the essence of all human agonies. But I will not linger at greater length upon this fearful yet wondrous episode in my life: I will proceed at once to state that when satisfied of the two murderous ruffians' departure, I succeeded in releasing myself from that perilous position and gained the peak of the cliff above. Then, seized with wild hysterical terror at even the bare idea of remaining near the edge of that frightful precipice, I hurried onward for several yards; until at length feeling myself in safety, I stopped short—sank upon my knees—and poured forth my soul in fervid, adoring worship.

Oh! how sweet, how sweet was now the enjoyment of life—of life snatched from the hideous perils through which I had just passed! In those first moments of my grateful enthusiasm and exultant emotions, I forgot all the lesser incidents of the night's adventure. What to me was it if in the biting chill of that February season I was exposed, thinly clad, to the night air—with my shoes and stockings saturated with the damps of the grass, my hair streaming wet with the dews over my shoulders, and with my very garments clinging damply around me? What also was the circumstance that my master's house had been robbed, and that I must return to tell a tale so extraordinary it could scarcely obtain belief? What, I ask, were all these considerations in comparison with the one grand all-absorbing thought that my life, which ere now had been hanging to a thread or indeed was not worth a moment's purchase, should now be safe through heaven's wondrous mercy?

I rose from my knees, having thus poured forth my soul in worship: and now all those considerations which I have just been sketching forth, sprang up one after the other in my mind. I felt that I was cold—for my shawl had come off, and I could not remember that I had had it on at all from the moment that I awoke to consciousness the second time when being hurried along by the two men. Indeed, so chill did I now become that I could not drag myself along very quick: but as I advanced the blood seemed to circulate more freely in my veins, and I was presently enabled to proceed at a quicker pace. Down the slope of the heights did I go, and at length entered the dark and silent streets of the town. The moon which had been peeping forth again and had guided me in my walk over the cliff, was now once more veiled in clouds; and thus the two or three stragglers whom I encountered in the street noticed not my wretched condition. Finally, I gained my master's house in safety, after an absence, as nearly as I could guess, of about an hour and a half, during which I had looked death face to face, had felt all its bitterness, and experienced all its most excruciating agonies!

Everything appeared quiet in the house. There were no lights to be seen at any of the windows—no signs of any one moving about within. The front door was shut; and without hesitation did I ring the bell. Three or four times had I to repeat the summons ere it was answered; and then at last I saw a glimmering appear through the fanlight above the door. Footsteps approached along the passage, and the door was opened by Betsy, who had huddled on a few clothes. Her astonishment on beholding me is scarcely describable; and it was evidently mingled with suspicions of a character most injurious to my prudence and propriety. And no wonder! those suspicions were natural enough, although my reputation had previously been so perfectly unsullied. For I was in the most wretched plight it is possible to conceive—my hair all floating in the wildest disorder, and the scanty clothing which I had on covered with mud and chalk-stains, and hanging about me like damp rags. Moreover, as I was subsequently informed, there was such strangeness in my looks that it seemed as if I had just come back from some scene of hideous debauchery. Staggering into the passage, I said in hurried and disjointed sentences, "For God's sake close the door, Betsy,—help me up-stairs—let me get to bed—I am frozen—I feel as if I were dying. Dreadful things have happened—dreadful, dreadful things! But I will tell you all presently."

And then a sudden sensation of giddiness came over me: I felt myself reeling, and remember to have been caught in the arms of the now terrified and startled Betsy. Then I recollected nothing more until on awakening from the trance into which I had fallen, I found myself in bed.

I was not in the nursery, but in a spare bed-room which I immediately recognized. A candle burnt upon a table near me. Betsy and Mrs. Messiter, both half-dressed and looking wild indeed by that uncertain light, were standing by the side of the couch. There was a strong smell of brandy in the room; and the taste which I now felt in my mouth as well as the half empty glass which Mrs. Messiter held in her hand, showed the nature of the remedy which had been used to recover me. Quantities of bed clothes were piled upon me—a fire had been lighted—and gratefully do I record the fact that both by Mrs. Messiter and the good-tempered Betsy was everything done for me that was possible under the circumstances.

Scarcely had I recovered my senses when a quick impatient tap was heard at the door, and Mrs. Messiter immediately went to answer it. She opened the door partially; and I heard her say, "Hush! the poor girl is only just recovering—she must not be disturbed."

"Well and good," was my master's stern and cold reply: "but she must explain without delay how she came in a condition so suspicious."

"Madam," I said, now exerting myself to speak; "leave the door ajar for a moment, and let master stay outside and listen. The house has been robbed——"

"Robbed! robbed!" were now the ejaculations which burst from the lips of the grocer, his wife, and his servant.

"Yes—robbed, sir," I repeated; "by those two men who visited you this evening. They have taken away your plate—they have emptied the till——"

"Good heavens, Mary!" ejaculated Mrs. Messiter: "what dreadful things are you telling us!"—and her looks fell upon me full of suspicion.

"Robbed—robbed—and by those villains!" ejaculated Mr. Messiter. "But are they gone? How do you know all this? Speak, Mary—speak! I insist upon your speaking:"—and he forced his way into the room, his wife not daring to oppose more than a very feeble resistance, which, with the natural delicacy of her sex on my account, she for a moment offered.

"Don't flurry the poor girl, sir," said Betsy, at once perceiving how I shrank under the bedclothes when my master so rudely and indelicately thrust himself into the chamber. "You had better let her tell missus all she has to say; and then missus can come and tell you everything again."

Mr. Messiter no doubt felt that his credit as a very particular, well-conducted, and highly respectable man was at stake in the eyes of his servant-of-all-work; and he accordingly took the hint which she gave him and left the room. I then proceeded to inform Mrs. Messiter how I knew that there were two such bad characters as the Bulldog and Sawbridge infesting the town of Ashford—how they had visited her husband on the preceding evening—how I had been an unintentional listener to what had passed on the occasion—how I had been alarmed in the night and had come down stairs to see that the house was safe—how I had been borne away by the two ruffians—how I had escaped in so providential a manner from the jaws of death—and also how I had overheard the entire conversation between the Bulldog and Sawbridge on the top of Shakspeare's Cliff, gathering from that conversation the particulars of the robbery.

"Mary," said Mrs. Messiter, who, as well as Betsy, had listened with varying feelings to my narrative, "I have seen so much good of you during the short time you have been with me, that I cannot doubt the truth of your story, extraordinary as some of its details are: and if for a moment, when you first stated that the house had been robbed, I regarded you with suspicion, you must forgive me."

"O, ma'am!" I exclaimed; "circumstances were indeed suspicious! But while I thank you for your kindness in assuring me that you place implicit belief in my word, I must beg to assure you that I am fully prepared to repeat the same tale before a magistrate, and even to be confronted with the two dreadful men at whose hands I have endured so much. Indeed," I cried, as a thought suddenly struck me, "if Mr. Messiter were to take a post chaise and proceed across to Ashford he would doubtless recover his property at once from these men."

"The suggestion is most valuable," said Mrs. Messiter: and bidding Betsy remain to attend upon me, she quitted the room.

In about twenty minutes she returned, saying that her husband had gone out to knock up neighbour Briggs the baker, whose chaise-cart he meant to borrow and drive over at once to Ashford: for of course Mr. Messiter did not exactly like the expense of a post-chaise. Mrs. Messiter then proceeded to inform me that the details I had given relative to the robbery were substantially correct. The locks of the front parlour and the private cupboard on the landing had both been picked, as had also that of the commode, or side-board, in which the plate was usually kept, but the whole of which had been carried off. The shop had likewise been entered from the passage, and the till robbed of its contents. Finally, it appeared that the burglars had effected an entrance from the back part of the premises, to which they gained access by climbing over the yard-wall. In fact, the scullery window had been forced open; and thus was it fully proved that the entry had really been accomplished by force, and not by the connivance of any one inside the dwelling.

"My husband fully believes the truth of your statement in all its details," said Mrs. Messiter: "and he is going off at once to Ashford in the hope of recovering his property. Should he succeed he would rather hush up the matter than have all the trouble, loss of time, and expense of a prosecution at the Assizes. He has therefore desired me to request both you and Betsy to keep the matter entirely to yourselves——"

"What, ma'am," I cried, unable to contain my indignation: "are those wretches, then, to go unpunished after all their cruel conduct to me? No thanks to *them* if I am alive at this moment!"

I spoke with warmth and resolution, because I was under the influence of several exciting thoughts. For I could not help feeling hurt and disgusted—almost enraged—at the cold-blooded selfishness of Mr. Messiter, who, forsooth, had very excellent reasons for not coming to an open rupture with the Bulldog and Sawbridge. It was nothing that I had been so shockingly treated—nothing that I had escaped only by a miracle from their murderous clutches—no, all this was nothing at all in comparison with the policy which impelled *him* to hush up the matter altogether, so as to avoid the inconvenience, disgrace, and probable ruin which would ensue from having to give in a court of justice an explanation of the nature of his connexion and transactions with the two ruffians. *They*, then, were to go unpunished for their infamous conduct towards me; so that Mr. Messiter might avoid exposure relative to the adulterations of his coffee! The humble servant-maid might be subjected to the most murderous outrage, and the guilty parties must escape with impunity in order to screen the meanness and knavery of a sanctimonious hypocrite! I was not vindictive; but still it was natural to desire the punishment of those dreadful characters. And apart from my own personal feeling on the subject, I had *another* motive for wishing that condign chastisement should overtake them. Ah! the reader can well understand that I was thinking of my brother Robert: for I reasoned within myself that if justice were to plunge Sawbridge and the Bulldog into prison for a term, or transport

them beyond the seas, there would be some hope of that unfortunate brother's reformation!

All these reflections passed through my mind far more rapidly than I have here been enabled to describe them; and under the influence of such feelings it is no wonder if I spoke with warmth and even with indignation, when Mrs. Messiter recommended silence and secrecy relative to the night's transactions.

"My dear girl," she said, in a tone of entreaty, "I beseech you not to suppose that I would advise you to a course repugnant to your feelings: but—but"—and after glancing uneasily towards Betsy for a moment, as much as to imply that she was one too many in the room, Mrs. Messiter bent down and said in a low but plaintive whisper, "If this affair is made public, everything will transpire relative to my husband's dealings with those dreadful men. Ruin would overtake us; and if you have no pity for *him*, at least have mercy upon me and my poor children!"

While she thus spoke, tears trickled down her wan and care-worn cheeks; and my heart was all in a moment moved towards her in such a way that I would rather have suffered death itself than do her an injury.

"Tranquillize yourself, ma'am," I said, taking her hand and pressing it to my lips. "Not for worlds would I adopt a course calculated to do you or your dear children a mischief."

The poor woman could not express her thanks in words—her heart was full almost to bursting: but she kissed my cheek with a fondness that convinced me of her gratitude. Presently her husband knocked at the door again, to intimate that he had obtained the loan of neighbour Briggs's cart to proceed at once to Ashford. He accordingly took his departure; and I experienced a sort

of relief when I knew that he was gone: for his indelicate intrusion into my room had aggravated, if possible, the aversion I had previously experienced towards him. Sleep then visited my eyes; and I did not awake until a late hour in the day, when I found myself much refreshed though still suffering from the effects of cold and exhaustion—so that I gladly followed Mrs. Messiter's kind recommendation to remain in bed and nurse myself until thoroughly recovered.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon Mr. Messiter returned from Ashford, his journey having been attended with complete success. The particulars thereof, as he detailed them to his wife, and as she repeated them to me, were as follow:—

It was half-past three in the morning when Mr. Messiter had set off from Dover; and at half-past five he reached Canterbury. There he rested an hour and took breakfast, after which he proceeded by the carrier's van to Ashford, leaving the chaise-cart at the inn-stables at Canterbury. He arrived at Ashford a little after nine, and went at once to the baking establishment tenanted by Sawbridge and the Bulldog. No one answered his summons—the place was shut up—and he therefore concluded they had not as yet returned. Keeping a watch upon the place from a little distance, he waited until near eleven o'clock, when he beheld them toiling along the road, all bespattered with mud and evidently well wearied with their long walk: for taking it as granted that they had struck across the country from Dover to Ashford (as there is no main road direct), they must have walked a distance of about two-and-twenty miles. Without waiting to afford them an opportunity of entering their dwelling, into which Mr. Messiter would perhaps have been by no means ready to follow them—having a due regard for his own personal safety—he at once confronted the ruffians; and armed with all imaginable hardihood though they were, yet they started with guilty amazement on beholding the grocer. He at once told them "that everything was known—that Mary Price had escaped their murderous intent—that she was alive to bear evidence against them—but that no further notice would be taken of the matter if they at once gave up the plate and money which they had stolen." The announcement that I, their supposed victim, was alive and ready to confront them in a tribunal of justice, must have been sufficient to strike terror and dismay—if not indeed a sort of superstitious awe—into the souls of even such reckless desperadoes as these: and as they perceived several persons moving about, in pursuance of their usual avocations, close by—especially five or six sturdy labourers who were passing along the road at the moment—they seemed to feel that a single word from Mr. Messiter's lips would at once ensure their capture upon a charge which might send them to the scaffold. Therefore, after a brief but vain attempt to effect a compromise, to which Mr. Messiter would not listen—for he saw that he had altogether the upper hand of the ruffians—they surrendered up all the plate and the money which they had about their persons. Thereupon Mr. Messiter hastened back to Canterbury by the first conveyance; and mounting the chaise-cart again, drove himself in a sort of triumph home to Dover.

Such was the result of the memorable incident of the burglary at Mr. Messiter's house, and which so nearly cost me my life. It was a week before I could leave the bed-chamber, and another week before I felt well enough to venture out into the open air. In the meantime, however, I had written full particulars of the whole proceedings to my brother William, explaining to him my reason for wishing them kept secret so far as the public was concerned, but enjoining him to see Robert without delay, communicate everything in confidence to him, and then appeal to him whether he would longer associate with the two miscreants who so nearly consummated the cold-blooded murder of his sister? By return of post I received a letter from William proffering me the most affectionate sympathy and condolence for all I had endured, but breathing a spirit of deep lamentation at the apparently untoward nature of my destiny. With regard to Robert, there was nothing cheering to relate; but on the contrary much to apprehend—for he had left Ashford a few days previously, and at about the same time the Bulldog and Sawbridge had likewise disappeared. Were those dreadful men and my unfortunate brother together? My God! I hoped not.

A fortnight had elapsed since the adventures I have been relating; and during this interval I had taken my meals in my own room. But being now quite well again, I descended with the children to the parlour, as I had been wont to do previous to those occurrences. And here I should observe that during this interval of a fortnight Mr. Smithson, the principal shopman, who had been for some years in Mr. Messiter's establishment, left rather suddenly. Until this time he had always contrived to exist upon good terms with his master: but on being blamed for something, he had abruptly turned round, given an insolent reply, and threatened to leave upon the spot. Mr. Messiter, not for a moment thinking he would put his menace into execution, told him to leave if he chose: whereupon Mr. Smithson took his departure then and there, followed by the malignant prophecy of Mr. Messiter "that he would yet come to the dogs." But it appears that Mr. Smithson only grinned significantly and hastened away.

It was on the very first morning of my descending to breakfast in the parlour after my illness that the following scene occurred. On entering the room, accompanied by the children, I found Mr. Messiter pacing to and fro with an expression of mingled wrath and vexation upon his countenance; while Mrs. Messiter was seated near the window from which she was gazing with a sort of fixed intentness.

"The ungrateful villain—the black-hearted scoundrel!" exclaimed Mr. Messiter, with all the bitterness of concentrated passion. "Is it possible that I have thus cherished a viper in my bosom to sting me at last? After all I have done for that man! I took him into my house when he had not a rag to his back or a shoe to his foot. For years past I have been as a father unto him, rearing him in a godly manner—conducting him in the paths of virtue and peace, and filling his belly with good wholesome victuals. And now he has done this!"

I could not help gazing in mingled curiosity and astonishment at Mr. Messiter, whose wailing had something indescribably ridiculous, as well as doleful in it—though heaven knows *he* had no intention

of imparting to his lament that dash of serio-comic ludicrousness which it assuredly had.

"Mary," he said, extending his arm towards the window: "behold a spectacle of the blackest ingratitude!"—and having thus spoken, Mr. Messiter stalked out of the room with an air as miserable and as martyrized as if he were about to be hanged on a charge of which he was innocent.

I mechanically advanced up to the window, and looking forth, beheld that the house opposite, which had been shut up for the last few months, was now opened as a grocer's shop and seemed to have a very excellent, or at all events a very attractive assortment of goods exhibited in the window. The shop had been newly painted and decorated, and looked altogether very handsome. But great indeed was my surprise when I beheld the following inscription in large gilt letters on the facia over the wide window:—

J. SMITHSON, GROCER AND TEA-DEALER.
(FROM MESSITER'S.)

The cause of my master's mingled wrathfulness and lamentation was now explained in a moment; and that splendid shop, too, was the object on which Mrs. Messiter's eyes were so intently rivetted. Mr. Smithson had thus opened not merely in avowed opposition to his late employer, but also in an establishment exactly facing his own. That establishment, it now appeared, had for some weeks past been secretly taken by Mr. Smithson, and as secretly fitted up. Not but that the Messiters had seen carpenters at work in the place and quantities of goods arriving during the last few days: but little had they suspected who it was that had taken that house so long shut up! Even to the very last instant had Mr. Smithson managed to keep his secret; and it was only on the particular morning of which I am writing, that the whole mystery was cleared up. Then, on Mr. Messiter's coming down to breakfast, did the new shop, just opened for the first time, and the splendid facia-board just fitted up, burst in all the gaud of fresh paint and gilding upon his astonished view!

But this was not all. For, as I subsequently learnt, while Mr. Messiter and his wife were still gazing in amazement from the window (before I had descended to the parlour), a letter was brought up by Betsy, and which Mrs. Messiter subsequently showed me. It was written by Mr. Smithson; and its contents were to the effect that he had all along hated and detested Mr. Messiter—that he had only remained with him so many years in order to get a thorough insight into his business, it being the best in Dover—that he thanked Mr. Messiter for his kind prophecy about his (Mr. Smithson) going to the dogs—but that he thought it very probable that of the two Mr. Messiter himself would be the first to experience that ignominious catastrophe.

No wonder, then, that Mr. Messiter was profoundly annoyed and greatly alarmed by the proceeding of his late shopman. For when Mr. Smithson had stated that he had remained in Mr. Messiter's employment to obtain a full insight into the grocery business, it really meant that he had staid so long in order to become thoroughly acquainted with all Mr. Messiter's *best customers*. Nor was it only for the reasons already stated that Mr. Messiter felt both grieved and alarmed at the unexpected opposition which had thus sprung up: but his ire and his apprehensions were alike aggravated by the spirited manner in which Mr. Smithson seemed determined to work out the competitive principle. For instance, in Mr. Smithson's window was displayed a flaming placard, printed in blue, green, red, and black inks, and the contents of which were to the following effect:—

BEWARE OF SPURIOUS COFFEE!!!

Unprincip'ed tradesmen deal largely in an article which they are pleased to call *Coffee*, but which is only a vile compound of unwholsome ingredients!!!!

J. Smithson pledges himself to sell nothing but genuine COFFEE.

There was another placard, with a wood-cut of a teapot on the top of it, and couched in the following terms:—

THE NOTED TEA-MART!

J. SMITHSON begs to announce to the nobility and Gentry of Dover and its vicinity, and to the Public in general, that his Establishment is the *only one in this town* for real Genuine Teas.

J. SMITHSON likewise begs to announce that he has entered into a contract with his Imperial Majesty the Emperor of all the Chinas for the supply of *a hundred thousand chests of tea annually*, and that he is therefore enabled to offer a genuine article at the lowest possible figure. The first consignment of ten thousand chests from his Imperial Majesty has taken place, and the choicest samples are now on sale!

No doubt the public must have been in a singular state of bewilderment and conjecture where Mr. Smithson could possibly stow away such an enormous quantity of goods, or to what extent the ancient cinq-port of Dover had been undermined to form so capacious a cellarage: and it may also have caused many to wonder *how* the ten thousand chests of tea arrived in Dover at all, seeing that there had been no extra amount of shipping in the harbour during the winter. But all this was no business of mine; and so I will not dwell upon it. Let me, in continuation, observe that there was a third placard, stuck above an enormous pile of brown sugar heaped up like an Egyptian pyramid; but it contained only these words—"J. SMITHSON does *not* adulterate *his* sugar:" and then in the very middle of the spacious shop-front was the most flaming placard of all, worded as follows:—

J. SMITHSON, having declined all farther connexion with the Shop over the way, and being determined to vend nothing but the *best articles* at the *lowest possible prices*, begs to thank the numerous families on whom he has so long had the honour of attending, for the promise of their *sole* and *exclusive* patronage; and he hopes to merit the reputation of the cheapest, most business-like, most punctual, most obliging, and most straightforward tradesman in Dover.

MARK!—No connexion with the Shop over the way!!!

Now, were not all these various engines of a brisk and spirited competition enough to drive Mr. Messiter mad? In fact, did not the wording of every one of the placards seem to allude most offensively, and indeed apply with unequivocal directness, to him and his establishment? A war of intense opposition was evidently contemplated by Mr. Smithson; and Mr. Messiter therefore (at least, as he alleged) was compelled "to take up arms in his own defence." That is to say, he hastened to a printer and had thousands of handbills struck off with all possible despatch. They were headed "CAUTION," and warned "the unwary public

against the unprincipled and untradesmanlike acts of a rival establishment." Mr. Messiter employed a man to stand in front of his shop and thrust these bills upon all persons proceeding along Snargate Street. But Mr. Smithson was not to be beaten in this way. He also paid a visit to his printer: and, lo and behold! handbills were distributed in front of *his* shop, as well as a new and enormous placard being exhibited with the taking announcement "that every one purchasing a pound of Tea at J. Smithson's establishment, should have half a pound of best refined Lump Sugar into the bargain; everybody purchasing a pound of his Coffee should have a quarter of a pound of best Jamaica soft Sugar: and everybody purchasing any article of inferior price, but to the value of a shilling, should have a glass of British Wine or of Cordial Hollands Gin, according to choice."

This manœuvre on the part of Mr. Smithson certainly proved an immense attraction, and his shop was crowded from morning till night. The men giving away bills were a perfect nuisance to everybody going up and down the street: crowds collected—and in fact the rivalry of the two grocers created an extraordinary sensation. Mr. Messiter's wonted coldness and reserve seemed to have altogether abandoned him: he was in a constant state of excitement and flurry from morning till night when down in the shop; but when upstairs in the parlour, nothing could exceed the brutality of his ill-humour. He seemed entirely to have thrown off the mask, and to think it no longer necessary to play a part—at least within the walls of his dwelling. The fact is, he naturally possessed an infamous temper; and now that it was goaded so painfully by Mr. Smithson's doings, from the instant he awoke in the morning till he went to bed at night he seemed as if he *must* vent it upon somebody. His poor children and his wife were the principal sufferers. Whatever they did was wrong. If Mrs. Messiter did not talk to him, he at once flew into a rage, accusing her of being sullen; and if she began to converse with him on his appearing in the parlour, then he declared that she bothered him and ought to know better. If the children went near him, they "tormented his life out:" if they kept away from him, they were "being brought up to hate and detest their own father!" Betsy and myself came in for our share of scolding and ill-humour; but I had given warning to leave, and my time was nearly up—while poor Betsy speedily followed my example.

Nothing could exceeed the wretchedness of my situation during the last fortnight I was in Mr. Messiter's service. Indeed, from the very instant that Smithson opened his opposition establishment, Mr. Messiter took not the trouble to play the hypocrite any longer; but he became the domestic tyrant openly as he had all along been so privately. Mr. Smithson's conduct was evidently goading him to frenzy: and though I cannot say that I had any pity for Mr. Messiter himself, I nevertheless entertained a boundless compassion for his poor wife and unfortunate children. For it struck me that this competitive war which had commenced between himself and Smithson, would prove the ruin of both: and then, what was to become of Mrs. Messiter and her young family? Yes—I really did pity them from the very bottom of my soul!

The end of the month came; and on the following day I was to leave the grocer's service. I went out for a walk with the children for the last time; and it really made me sad to mark how their sickly countenances had recently grown more sickly still—as if, young though they were, the terror inspired by their father's increasing harshness, and indeed brutality, had produced an influence like a withering blight fastening upon their very vitals. And the eldest boy too—so pensive, so delicately handsome—just such a youth as a father ought to have loved so fondly, because the child himself was of such an affectionate disposition—he, poor boy, seemed pining away; and it struck me that consumption had already marked him for its own!

My heart, then, was full of sadness as I returned home with the children from this our last walk; and as soon as I went up-stairs Mrs. Messiter appeared at the parlour door and beckoned me to enter. I accordingly went in; and she addressed me in the following manner:—

"Mary, a circumstance has transpired which enables me to give you some cheering intelligence—at least I think and hope that you will regard it as such."

"Ah! ma'am," I said, thinking she was speaking of herself; "if anything has occurred to make you happier——"

"Good God, Mary!" she cried, bursting into tears: "what good fortune *can* possibly shine upon me? No, no—my own destiny is cast; and I have a presentiment *here*," she added, pressing her hand with convulsive tightness upon her bosom, "that it will continue and end as sadly as it has begun!"

"Ah! ma'am, there is a Power above who can change all that!" I said, half blinded by the tears that had started forth upon my lashes.

Mrs. Messiter shook her head despairingly: then hastily wiping her eyes, and composing her feelings as well as she was able, she said, "The intelligence to which I alluded refers to yourself, Mary. I presume you wish another situation as soon as you can obtain it?"

I of course replied in the affirmative; but at the same time, for more reasons than one, I had resolved not to go into service again at Dover. For I could not bear the thought of being constantly reminded, every time I passed by Mr. Messiter's house, of the unhappiness that prevailed within those walls: while a sentiment of prudence and maidenly modesty forbade me from remaining in a place where I stood the chance of encountering the Hon. Eustace Quentin.

"I think, then," resumed Mrs. Messiter, "that circumstances enable me to give you the assurance of an excellent and most eligible place, which you must go and see about directly. What say you to entering a nobleman's family?"

"Ah! I should be afraid that my humble country manners would not fit me for such a situation," was my answer.

"My dear girl, it is an excellent place—and you must be well aware that I would not recommend you to take it unless I thought so. Lord and Lady Harlesden are at this moment staying at *Wright's Hotel*, but will return to London to-morrow. They are in want of an under nurse-maid, and will take *you*."

Mrs. Messiter spoke with an air of confidence

which made me survey her with mingled curiosity and surprise.

"Do not ask me any questions, Mary," she said, a sickly smile appearing upon her wan countenance. "Some little negotiation has already taken place, and you must go directly and see her ladyship."

I thanked Mrs. Messiter for her great kindness towards me, and in obedience to her suggestion at once repaired to *Wright's Hotel*, the finest and most fashionable establishment of the sort in Dover. On arriving there I inquired if Lady Harlesdon was within; and the waiter to whom I addressed myself, immediately summoned a footman in splendid livery, and who at once asked me if I was the young person who had been recommended to her ladyship for the vacant situation in the nursery? I replied in the affirmative; and he desired me to follow him. He then led the way up the principal staircase, and bidding me wait a few moments, entered a room opening therefrom. In about a minute he re-appeared, and at once conducted me into that apartment,—where a lady of exquisite beauty was lounging negligently upon a sofa, and a very old gentleman of dignified demeanour was seated in an arm-chair near her.

This lady was about three-and-twenty years of age. Her eyes were of the finest azure I ever beheld elsewhere than in the heaven above; and long flaxen ringlets, looking like tresses of pale satin, showered down upon her shoulders of dazzling whiteness. Nothing could equal—certainly not excel—the snowy whiteness of her skin: her complexion indeed was absolutely dazzling; and though so fair, she had a fine tint of carnation upon her cheeks, while the vivid scarlet of her lips enhanced the animation of her looks. She was tall, slender, and exquisitely symmetrical in shape: her dress, without being gaudy, was of an elegant description, and most tastefully adapted to suit the fairness of her complexion. Altogether, she was as bright and beautiful a creature as ever the sun shone upon; and for the first minute that I stood in the room I was perfectly dazzled by her presence.

The old gentleman to whom I have alluded, and whom I supposed to be her father—if not her grandfather—was near seventy; and though there was nothing repulsive nor forbidding in his air, yet did his countenance wear an expression of the haughtiest aristocratic pride, so that when he turned his eyes upon me as I entered the room, it seemed just as if he were some infinitely superior being condescendingly looking down from the pedestal of his rank upon me, the humblest of pigmies, below! He was dressed with what might be termed extreme precision, and evidently took great pains with his toilette—perhaps to compensate for the havoc which time had made in his appearance—though he never could have been good-looking.

Lady Harlesdon was reclining upon the sofa with a sort of languid air as I entered the room; and slowly raising herself up to a sitting-posture, she said in a very sweet voice and with the most encouraging affability of manner, "You are the young person who has been recommended to me for the under nurse-maid's place?"

I replied in the affirmative; and her ladyship, after asking me how old I was and a few other ordinary questions, said, "Well, Mary, I am perfectly willing to receive you into my service——"

"How—what, my dear Clementina!" interrupted her companion, speaking in a voice which was not exactly expressive of rebuke, but of a sort of deferential remonstrance, and yet was accompanied with a pompous manner and ostentatious delivery. "You know nothing of this young woman's character, and you engage her off hand like this? Really, my dear, you had better let Mrs. Brandon make the necessary inquiries—as indeed she *ought* to have done, before allowing *you* to be troubled with seeing this girl at all."

"Excuse me, my dear," said Lady Harlesdon, with a soft and most bewitching smile, which displayed two rows of brilliant teeth shining like pearls between the vivid scarlet of her lips; "I have already heard as much as is necessary relative to this young person. I will tell you all about it presently:"—and she laid her beautiful snowy hand upon his wrinkled one, while she looked up into his face in a manner so full of confiding tenderness that no doubt was now left in my mind as to the relationship existing between them.

"Well, well, my dear," said Lord Harlesdon—for he indeed it was, and this young angelic creature of such nymph-like beauty and radiant loveliness, was the wife of that old, old man whom I had at first taken to be her father, with a doubt whether he were not a more antiquated relative still: "well, well—have your own way. You know I humour you in everything:" and he patted her cheek in a manner indicative of a doting fondness.

I felt rather uneasy and cast down my eyes: for it struck me that such manifestations between husband and wife ought not to take place before strangers. But then, what was a poor servant-girl? Nothing at all!—a complete nonentity, whose presence was not to be thought of for a moment.

"Well, Mary," said Lady Harlesdon, once more turning to me; "you may consider yourself engaged. My housekeeper Mrs. Brandon will arrange with you about wages and all that sort of thing: but as she will fully meet your views in that respect, there need be no delay in your entering upon your duties as soon as you like. When can you come?—for we return to London to-morrow —— do we not, my dear?" she asked turning towards her husband.

"Yes—the carriages will be in readiness at eleven o'clock," was Lord Harlesdon's answer; "and therefore the young woman had better be here at an early hour in the morning."

I promised to be at the hotel by nine o'clock; then, having made my curtsey, quitted the room and hastened back to Mrs. Messiter, whom I cordially thanked for having been the means of procuring me a situation in the service of so amiable a lady. I longed to ask Mrs. Messiter how it came to happen that she had succeeded in paving the way so fully for my acceptance on the part of Lady Harlesdon: but as she herself volunteered no explanation, I thought it ungenerous to ask for any, considering that she might choose to have her own way of doing me a favour.

On the following morning I took leave of Mrs. Messiter and the children, and an affecting parting it was. Both she and they cried as I said

farewell: indeed the children clung round me as if I were some near and dear relative—while Mrs. Messiter embraced me affectionately, and gave me a few words of advice as good as it was well-meant. As for Mr. Messiter, he was so busy in superintending the hoisting up of an immense placard in front of his shop, and which contained some rival announcement levelled at Mr. Smithson, that he did not see me issue forth from the private door; and to tell the truth, I was very glad of an excuse for not saying farewell to him at all—but hastening along the street, I soon reached *Wright's Hotel.*

CHAPTER XIV.

MY THIRD PLACE.

Lady Harlesdon was his lordship's third wife, and had been married to him five years. They had three children—the two eldest being boys, and the youngest a little girl of a year old. Having passed the winter in Italy, the family had just returned to England, but had stayed to rest for two or three days at Dover, and also because Lady Harlesdon (as I understood) had some relation living there whom she wished to see ere proceeding to London. The three children had accompanied their parents in their Continental travel; and the retinue consisted of his lordship's valet, the steward, two footmen, two lady's-maids, the housekeeper, and the upper nurse,—myself now entering upon the situation of under nurse-maid.

Precisely at eleven o'clock three travelling carriages, each with four post-horses, were in readiness; and in a short time the cavalcade was rolling rapidly out of Dover along the London Road. The upper nurse and myself, with the three children, occupied the interior of one of the carriages; and I found my fellow-servant, whose name was Jemima, a very good-tempered and unaffected young woman. Her kindness to the children was evidently of the most genuine character; and she at once placed herself upon a friendly footing with me. In the course of conversation, during our journey to London, she informed me that Lord Harlesdon was enormously rich, and that his town-mansion, to which we were then proceeding, was of the most magnificent description. He had also three or four country seats, and immense estates attached to each. Jemima went on to say that it was a very odd thing how so young and beautiful a creature as Lady Harlesdon could have been induced to marry a nobleman old enough to be her grandfather; and it did not appear that she had either been forced into the match by her relations, or that poverty had induced her to form such an alliance: for she herself belonged to a noble and wealthy family, and being endowed with so surpassing a beauty, was not likely to have been without many eligible offers on the part of suitors whose age more nearly approached her own.

Of course Jemima gave me this information while the eldest boy, who was a very intelligent child of four years old, was sleeping soundly: and as he presently awoke, any farther conversation on the same topic was cut short. Soon afterwards, it being now late in the afternoon, the carriages rolled into the huge metropolis. I can scarcely say what my impressions were upon entering London for the first time. It seemed to me a vast wilderness of brick and mortar: and I must confess that I experienced a certain feeling of disappointment at the miserable aspect of the miles and miles of streets through which we passed ere reaching the West End. For though it was dusk when I thus beheld the capital for the first time, yet by the aid of the street-lamps and the lights in the windows of private houses and shops, I could see quite sufficient to dissipate at once all the delusive conceptions I had hitherto formed relative to the grandeur and the magnificence of England's chief city. Indeed, there is nothing beyond a mere sense of *vastness* to strike the eye of the stranger who enters London for the first time by any of the great routes on the southern side of the river: and thus as the carriage rolled onward through the labyrinth of streets which continue uninterruptedly from Blackheath up to Westminster Bridge, it struck me that what I thus saw of London realized only *one* previously conceived idea—namely, that of magnitude—while it disappointed numerous others, such as beauty, magnificence, and all the varied signs of a general prosperity.

But on reaching Westminster Bridge and beholding its immense span, traced by the long arching lines of its lamps, I now felt that I was borne across a river at least worthy of being the site of such a vast metropolis: and then, on dashing up into the regions of fashion, I began to think that at least some of my visions relative to London would be realized. The carriages drove into Grosvenor Square, and stopped at one of the largest of the palatial dwellings of that fashionable quarter. The portals unfolded their wings—a flood of effulgence burst forth from the hall—half-a-dozen domestics in their splendid liveries issued forth—and an equal number of tastefully dressed female servants gathered in the hall, to receive their lord and lady after their long absence from home. When I in my turn entered the dwelling, holding the youngest child in my arms, and accompanying Jemima, who took charge of the two little boys,—I was perfectly astonished at the magnificence which met my view on every side. The interior was a perfect blaze of light. The lofty ceiling of the spacious hall was supported by marble pillars; and the open doors on either side afforded glimpses of immense apartments sumptuously furnished, and with enormous lustres suspended to the ceilings. The marble staircase, wide enough for a dozen persons to ascend abreast, was lighted all the way up by lamps held in the hands of beautiful alabaster statues as large as life. The first landing was ornamented also with beautiful specimens of statuary, and splendid vases of porcelain filled with dried rose leaves, that exhaled a delicious but not too powerful perfume. Thence likewise opened several doors leading into the State Apartments, the grandeur of which, as I threw my looks rapidly inside, filled me with amazement. Two more ascents of stairs, as brilliantly lighted and almost as magnificently embellished as the first, led to the landing whence opened the range of apartments called the Nursery Floor.

Here was a room expressly devoted for the children to play in, and spread with a thick carpet,

so that if they fell they could not hurt themselves very much. The shelves were covered with toys of the most beautiful as well as expensive description; and it really seemed a sin that articles on which so much ingenuity had been bestowed, and which really were of the most artistic description, should be destined to share the common lot of children's playthings and thus be doomed to speedy dislocation, fracture, and destruction. An adjoining room was fitted up as a sort of parlour, in which the children were to take their meals. Beyond this were three bed-chambers, communicating one with another, and all furnished tastefully as well as handsomely. To be brief, the aspect of the Nursery Floor was not only most cheerful and pleasant, but was also in perfect keeping with the other parts of a house which, as I have said, was furnished in the most sumptuous manner.

I soon found that my situation was in all respects likely to be a very comfortable one; and in writing to my dear brother William, I failed not to tell him how happy I should be were I not constantly harassed by fears concerning the welfare of my brother Robert. But I had not been many weeks at Harlesdon House, before I began to find out that the other domestics were very far from being as contented as I. Indeed, with the exception of Jemima, they each and all had their complaints, to which they failed not to give utterance whenever they came up into the nursery or had opportunities for chatting together. But the sum and substance of these complainings will be better understood if I describe the constitution of the household.

The person who exercised the highest authority in this household was his lordship's "gentleman" —a sedate, elderly, well-mannered person, who always dressed in black and was very neat and precise in his appearance. It was his duty to be in attendance in his lordship's dressing-room, and to superintend *everything*, but to do *nothing* himself. Then there were two valets, who were under the orders of the "gentleman," and who *did* everything which *he* superintended. But in their avocations was included nothing absolutely menial; so that under them there were two pages; and as there were certain things which these pages were too genteel to perform, the footmen were at the beck and call of the pages. But again, as in the lowest depths there is a lower still, so there were offices and duties too menial for even the footmen; and these were delegated to the shoe-black and stable boys. Then the stable-boys themselves were under the grooms; and the grooms bowed to the authority of the coachman; while the coachman had to take his orders from his lordship's "gentleman." Another important functionary in the household was the steward, who kept all his lordship's accounts and managed the domestic finances. The next in rank was the butler, having an adjutant with the denomination of under-butler, and an assistant in the wine-department called the cellarer. A similarly graduated scale was applied to the female hierarchy of the household, the highest authority in this sphere being Mrs. Brandon, the housekeeper. Immediately under her were the lady's-maids, who were much too genteel to do any work that properly belonged to the housemaids; and the housemaids again would not think of "lowering themselves" by performing any work that came within the province of the under-housemaids. In the kitchen the man-cook gave his orders to the two kitchen-maids, who in their turn kept their own duties as distinct as possible from those of the scullions. Up in the nursery Jemima was the dominant authority and I a merely her lieutenant: but then, as we were both good-tempered and never quarrelled—and as we were alone together, and beyond the same influences which moved, agitated, and excited all the rest of the household—there was no possibility of dispute as to the precise line of demarcation which separated our respective functions.

Having thus explained the constitution of the household, I think that the reader will be at no great loss to understand how such an organization contained within itself all the elements of jealousy, envy, and hatred—and how such passions could not fail to lead to endless bickerings, contentions, and complainings, together with the turmoil and excitement of petty tyrannies inflicted on the one hand and resented on the other. For instance, if ever his lordship's "gentleman" gave any instructions of his own accord to the steward, there was an immediate clash of the two authorities, the "gentleman" asserting his rank as superior to that of the steward, and the steward looking very much inclined to snap his fingers in the face of the "gentleman." The valets, disliking the "gentleman," were always whispering bits of scandal so as to make mischief between him and the steward: while on the other hand the butler, hating the steward, was always telling the "gentleman" how disrespectfully the steward spoke of him. Then the valets on one side and the butler on the other did not seem at all to entertain either mutual respect or friendship; and there were incessant disputes as to whether a valet had the power to order a butler about, or whether on the contrary the butler was not a superior officer to the valets. The pages generally took part with the valets against butler and under-butler; but all united in common contempt for the footmen; and these again vented their spleen upon the stable-boys. Of course Mrs. Brandon the housekeeper was a highly important personage; and though she admitted the lady's-maids to her intimacy, yet she could not possibly condescend to let a housemaid sit down in her presence; and in the same way that the "gentleman," the steward, and the butler expected to be called "sir" by all their subordinates, so did Mrs. Brandon look to be saluted as "ma'am" by all *her* inferiors in the female department. The "gentleman" had his room—the steward had his—Mrs. Brandon had her's—and the lady's-maids had their own: the butler had his pantry, with a little parlour adjoining—and all these high domestic functionaries took their meals together in the housekeeper's room, while all the rest took their's together in the servants'-hall. But even in the servants'-hall, immense class-distinctions prevailed: because the housemaids would not sit next to the scullions, while the stable-boys were made to eat at a table by themselves. As for Jemima and myself, we had our meals up in the nursery; and as I before observed, we managed to get on very comfortably together without any quarrelling at all.

But those nice divisions which I have been

describing, as marking out the "aristocracy," the "gentility," and the "vulgarity" amongst the household servants, were not alone the causes of incessant heartburnings, envies, hatreds, jealousies, and complainings. There was *one* word which seemed to be the perfect talisman, in an evil sense, of all the most serious disputes, and violent altercations. This one word which kept up such incessant intestine warfare, was "PERQUISITES." The "gentleman" was too aristocratic to take perquisites at all: they commenced with the steward and valets on the one hand, and with the housekeeper and the lady's-maids on the other,—descending down to the lowest menial in either male or female department. From the left-off garments of his lordship down to the lees of wine in a bottle—from a cast-away silk dress of her ladyship down to the contents of a dripping-pot in the scullery—these perquisites were incessant bones of contention, ramifying the spirit of bickering throughout the entire domestic organization. And as so much was said upon this ubject of perquisites, the topic being day after day in one shape or another talked of in my presence, I could not fail to learn many strange particulars relative to the proceedings adopted in order to increase the amount of booty plundered in the form of "perquisites."

The whole financial arrangements of the household being in the hands of the steward and the housekeeper, they enjoyed immense opportunities for peculation. They had the appointing of all the tradesmen belonging to their respective departments, and compelled every dealer to make out his bills in such a manner as to afford a liberal discount for the behoof of the said steward and housekeeper when pay-day came. If any tradesman objected to so dishonest a course—(and very, very rarely were such objections made)—he was coolly told "that he must discontinue sending for orders in future;" and this threatened loss of custom very soon rendered him pliant and ductile to the plan of proceeding above described. That Lord and Lady Harlesdon were perfectly well aware they were thus systematically and continuously robbed, there cannot be the slightest doubt: but they were equally conscious that it was part of an invariable system, and that if they were to discharge their present steward and housekeeper, their successors would pursue exactly the same course. Besides, it was utterly repugnant to the high and mighty notions of lordly wealth and proud aristocracy to condescend to look into tradesmen's bills, or have anything to do with such a vulgar process as the addition of pounds, shillings, and pence! I was positively assured in a confidential manner by Jemima, that the housekeeper always re-made out the laundress's bill, increasing the charges about three shillings on every ten; and of course the other small tradesmen's accounts were tampered with in a similar manner—the large tradesmen entering, as above stated, into the conspiracy and making out *their* bills in such a manner as to be able to afford a discount of ten pounds upon every hundred.

There are however certain minuter details to the explanation of which I must descend. And first of all I will speak of the thousand and one ways adopted by valets in order to commit their depredations—for such indeed they may be termed—upon their master's wardrobe. They keep certain articles of apparel out of sight until the recollection of them is lost; and then it becomes easy to appropriate these articles to themselves. They use pumice-stone to the seams of trousers and the elbows of coats, so as to give them a shabby appearance even when in reality they are quite new: the articles of apparel thus treated, are thrown aside and become the perquisites of the ingenious but unprincipled valets. As for waistcoats, by pulling off the strings or making a button hang loose, they give them the appearance of being too old for farther use; and the owner either does not pause to reflect how often he has worn them, or is too aristocratic to wear anything that has been *mended*, and so orders them to be flung aside. After a party, it is a common trick for valets to grease the garments which their masters have worn, and thus give them an air as if soup, melted butter, or rich gravy had been spilt upon them. By way of a variation in their tricky proceedings, valets artfully cut or burn a small hole in the upper leather of a new boot, after which they know that it will not be worn, but will be added to the list of their perquisites. Sometimes they scrape with a knife the collars or the wristbands of shirts, at the edges, to make the linen look old and fretted out: but when the said shirts, being discarded, fall into their hands, a new wristband or collar renovates them completely. In a word, it would be impossible to detail all the instances of low cunning and mean contrivance to which valets have recourse in order to increase their perquisites. I may add, however, that it is of course their study to promote extravagance on the part of their masters; and if they are in the service of very careless persons, or of masters too proudly aristocratic to condescend to inquire about the state of their wardrobe, they commit tremendous depredations. Numbers of valets, on leaving service, take substantial shops, or else become the proprietors of first-rate hotels; and a man of this class who without a farthing enters the service of a master whom he may thus rob, is certain to amass a considerable sum of money in eight or ten years.

It is just the same with regard to lady's-maids and the wardrobes of their mistresses. A clever lady's-maid, with plenty of tact and cunning, will avail herself of all the extravagances and weaknesses of her mistress in order to suit her own selfish ends. She will affirm, for instance, "that her ladyship does not look at all well in the pale satin dress, but that the dark one becomes her admirably:" so the lady is set against the pale satin, which accordingly becomes the perquisite of the artful maid. Or if the coveted satin dress should not become a "cast-off" so soon as the maid thinks it ought, she will manage to soil it with a fruit stain or grease; and then with exclamations about its being "a thousand pities," will display the mark to her lady, who of course abandons the dress at once. Furs are purposely soiled, muslin dresses inked, silks and satins stained, bonnets beat, linen torn, and all kinds of tricks thus put into practice, in order to swell the lady's-maid's perquisites with the discarded articles from her mistress's wardrobe.

There are shops where valets and lady's-maids are in the habit of disposing of the left-off gar-

ments which thus fall into their hands; and from what I have heard I can affirm that many of these shops are but little better than receptacles for stolen goods: they are in respect to the higher class of domestic servants what too many of the marine-store dealers are to the lowest orders of the people; and a great amount of peculation and downright robbery is occasioned by the facilities with which the proceeds can thus be disposed of. But let me not be misunderstood: I do not mean to stigmatize all valets and all lady's-maids as tricksters and cheats—much less level a sweeping denunciation against the whole of them as a class of thieves and plunderers. Heaven forbid! There are no doubt many honest valets who would not pilfer even the most trifling article, and many lady's-maids whose characters are unimpeachable: but they are only the exceptions to the rule, and do not form the rule itself. I must likewise observe that if as a class the higher orders of domestic servants are thus prone to trickery, knavishness, and peculation, to increase their perquisites, the proceeding has become so systematic as to cease to be regarded in the light of dishonesty. A valet or a lady's-maid who will not for a moment hesitate to have recourse to the means above described, may be scrupulously honest in all other respects, and experience as genuine a horror of downright stealing as the most virtuous persons in the world. In the same way that a tradesman will give short weight or sell adulterated goods, and yet not consider that he is practising a dishonest act, so systematic has the proceeding become—will valets and lady's-maids practise *their* pursuits without being sensible of their nefariousness. And lastly, ere I conclude my remarks on this subject, let me add that the system which I have been exposing is as much, if not more, the fault of masters and mistresses themselves than of their servants. This system is known to exist: it is tolerated—it may

even be said to be winked at and encouraged: seldom is it that ever an attempt is made on the part of masters and mistresses to put a stop to it; and by their very indolence in looking after their own affairs, or else through the ridiculous pride which makes them consider any such interference to be beneath them, they wilfully shut their eyes to what is going on, and thus tacitly assent to the practice. Thus is it that the laziness and absurd vanity of aristocratic and wealthy families are both alike most demoralizing in their effects, and at least as culpable as the knavery of the systems which they generate or allow to exist.

CHAPTER XV.

THE REVELATION OF A SECRET.

It was in the month of March when I entered the service of Lord and Lady Harlesdon: three months had elapsed, and it was now once more the middle of glorious summer. During the interval just named nothing occurred deserving of special mention; and so far as my place was concerned I had every reason to be satisfied—even happy. For I was well treated—well lodged—had excellent food—and was liberally paid in respect to wages. Lady Harlesdon, who made it a rule to come up into the nursery once every day, was particularly kind to me, and frequently gave me to understand that I was a special favourite with her. I felt exceedingly grateful: and, as I have above observed, should have been happy enough, were it not that the image of my unfortunate brother Robert was often—Oh! so very often, present to my mind. For, alas! ever since I had overheard the dread discourse between the Bulldog and Sawbridge on the top of Shakspeare's Cliff, I had entertained the worst—yes, the very worst misgivings relative to my brother. Suspicions of the darkest character pointed him out to me as even more criminal than I had previously conceived; and indeed all I overheard on that dreadful night, had opened my eyes more widely, but more painfully than ever, to Robert's lost condition. The letters which I from time to time received from William, informed me that Robert had not returned to Ashford; nor was it known what had become of him. It however appeared that Sawbridge and the Bulldog occasionally revisited the town, but no longer seemed to make it their settled abode, and were indeed more frequently absent than during past times they were wont to be. My imagination depicted Robert as being more completely under the influence of those wretches than ever; and I could not help shuddering as I thought of the future in respect to him.

But to continue the thread of my narrative. It was one fine morning in the month of June, that Jemima and I had just dressed the children to take them for a walk in Hyde Park, when a page came hastily to announce that her ladyship was ascending to the nursery in company with a gentleman, who had come to pass a fortnight at the house and who had expressed a great anxiety to see the little ones. Jemima and I accordingly waited until Lady Harlesdon made her appearance, followed by the gentleman alluded to, and to whom she was chatting gaily as she approached. He was dressed in plain clothes: but the very instant that he reached the threshold of the nursery-parlour, did I recognize Sir Aubrey Clavering!

I had the youngest child in my arms at the moment; and it is a wonder that I did not drop the poor little creature in the suddenness of the surprise and confusion which seized upon me. That Sir Aubrey instantaneously recognized me also I could see full well: indeed he at once gave a quick and scarcely perceptible shake of the head, as much as to imply that he did not want this mutual recognition to be observed by her ladyship. Nevertheless, Lady Harlesdon *did* notice, or at all events did suspect, that some sign of intelligence had passed between us: for on observing my sudden confusion, she at once turned round and bent her looks full upon Sir Aubrey Clavering.

"Have you ever seen my under nurse maid before?" she asked: and methought there was a strange quivering in her voice, while the glance which she now flung back upon me was quite different from the amiable expression her looks were wont to wear.

"Well—I think not—yes—no," stammered Sir Aubrey; and he vainly twirled his delicately pencilled black moustache as a cover for his confusion.

"Mary," said her ladyship, now fixing her eyes with a strange intentness upon me, "you have seen this gentleman before?"

"Yes, my lady," I at once replied: but I felt that the deepest crimson was suffusing my cheeks. "It was when I was in service at Mr. Twisden's——"

"Oh—ah—to be sure—I recollect," exclaimed Sir Aubrey: then in a kind of off-hand contemptuous manner, he said, "But of course one does not recollect every nursery-girl one chances to meet in the world."

Lady Harlesdon for a moment looked distressed; but almost instantaneously recovering her presence of mind, she said, "Come, Sir Aubrey, let us retrace our way to the drawing-room. The children, you perceive, are going out."

"Ah! but I must embrace them all first," exclaimed Sir Aubrey: and thus speaking he lifted up the Hon. Master Alexander Adolphus (the eldest), whom he kissed with much apparent warmth: then he took up the Hon. Master Albert Henry (the second child), who screamed horribly on feeling the moustache in contact with his face.

But in the meantime Lady Harlesdon took the infant (the Hon. Miss Isabella Clementina) from my arms, and herself handed the little creature to Sir Aubrey Clavering, who likewise bestowed upon the child a due share of his caresses. Lady Harlesdon then gave back the infant to me; and I could not help noticing that while her manner was very serious, there was also an expression of vexation and annoyance in her looks.

"Beautiful children — beautiful indeed!" exclaimed Sir Aubrey: and it struck me at the time that he said so with a certain sincerity, very different from the constrained tone of politeness with which he had praised Mrs. Twisden's children when staying at the Lodge.

"Come, Sir Aubrey," said Lady Harlesdon, evidently anxious to hurry him away: and he accordingly followed her from the room.

Jemima and I then took the children for a walk

into the Park; and till we got thither my companion said not a word respecting the scene which had just taken place in the nursery. But on entering Hyde Park, we sat down upon a bench inside the enclosure; and while Alexander and Albert played about upon the grass in the warm sunshine, and the little Isabella slept upon my lap, Jemima began to broach the subject which led to the following conversation.

"Did you observe how strange her ladyship looked when you said that you had seen Sir Aubrey before at Twisden Lodge?"

"I certainly did perceive something unusual and strange in her ladyship's manner."

"Ah! and now I suspect something," continued Jemima, with a mysterious look, "which never struck me before! But come here, Alexander!" she cried, as another thought suddenly appeared to flash to her mind.

The little fellow came up in obedience to this summons; and Jemima, after gazing at him fixedly for upwards of a minute, said, "Look now, Mary—do you see the likeness?"

The question seemed to open my eyes in an instant to a fact which had never struck me before, but which now all in a moment became as apparent and unmistakable as possible.

"Now run and play again, there's a good little fellow," said Jemima: and away sped Alexander to join his little brother in renewed romps upon the grass. "Now what do you think, Mary?"

"I think," was my frank and candid answer, "that by a strange coincidence there is a great likeness between Master Alexander and Sir Aubrey Clavering."

"Great likeness indeed!" exclaimed Jemima: and then she looked at me so suspiciously, or rather significantly, that I could not help penetrating her thoughts, although I at first had not the slightest notion of what was thus passing in her mind.

"Let us walk," said I, not wishing to continue the subject: for it seemed to me a painful and also an indelicate and improper one for servants to enter upon in respect to their mistress.

"No," said Jemima, "we will rest here a little longer:" then, after some hesitation and fidgetting, she observed, "I will tell you a secret, Mary, if you like; and if you promise not to tell any body what I am going to say——"

"I can assure you," was my prompt answer, "I would rather not hear any secrets."

"Ah! but this one regards yourself," urged Jemima.

"Regards *me!*" I exclaimed, my curiosity now suddenly piqued.

"Yes: and if," continued Jemima, with a still more meaning look, "I whispered to your ear the name of Eustace Quentin——"

I could not help an ejaculation of surprise escaping my lips; and I felt as if all the blood in my body suddenly gushed upwards to my countenance.

"You see that I *do* know something which interests you, Mary," continued Jemima: "but of course you will never tell any body that I have talked to you on the subject—because I was charged not to mention the name of Eustace Quentin in your hearing, or at least not until you had found out that he is her ladyship's cousin——"

"Ah!" I ejaculated, the suspicion flashing to my mind like lightning that it was through *him* I had found my way into Lady Harlesdon's service: and again did I feel myself blushing and overwhelmed with confusion.

"Yes—they are first cousins: and it was to see him that my lord and lady, on returning from the continent, remained two or three days at Dover where he is quartered," continued Jemima. "In the forenoon of the day before we left Dover her ladyship sent me to request Mrs. Messiter the grocer's wife to call upon her immediately, and if possible to bring her along with me. So off I went to the address indicated, and found Mrs. Messiter alone. You were out walking with the children at the time, as she told me——"

"Ah! I recollect," I exclaimed. "It was my last walk with them!"—and the tears came into my eyes as the images of those pale, pensive, spirit-broken children were thus recalled to my mind.

"Well, shall I go on?" inquired Jemima, archly.

"Yes. Since you have begun the narrative," said I, "there is no need to leave me in a state of suspense or uncertainty relative to its subsequent details."

"Ah! I thought I should excite your curiosity at last," exclaimed Jemima, laughing: and then she continued in the following manner:—"Well, as I was saying, Mrs. Messiter accompanied me to the hotel and I conducted her into her ladyship's presence. When I was about to withdraw, her ladyship bade me remain, observing that there was no harm in my overhearing what she was about to say. Her ladyship then asked Mrs. Messiter whether she had not a young person of the name of Mary Price in her service?—and then you should have heard the way in which Mrs. Messiter began speaking of you! Or rather," continued the good-natured Jemima, "you should *not* have heard; for it would have made you quite vain to hear how the good woman praised you up to the skies. Her ladyship then spoke as near as I can recollect in the following manner:—'All that you have said, Mrs. Messiter, exactly corroborates everything that has been represented to me concerning this Mary Price. Indeed, I have a cousin—an excellent young gentleman, and who is totally incapable of a dishonourable act, or of entertaining any sinister purpose—who has requested me to take Mary Price into my service: but this is to be done without *his* name appearing in the matter—otherwise the young girl's delicate sensibilities would at once be so touched as to prompt her to refuse the place. It appears, Mrs. Messiter,' continued her ladyship, 'that when Mary Price was in service at Twisden Lodge a few months ago, one of my cousin Quentin's brother officers, but whose name he has not mentioned to me, grossly insulted this young girl: she resented his conduct, and Quentin appearing on the scene at the time, afforded her his protection. But the circumstance led to a duel in which Quentin was wounded; and subsequently exchanging regiments, he fell in the other day with Mary Price again here at Dover. The little conversation which took place between them on the occasion, added to the interest previously excited on her behalf, has impressed my cousin Quentin with a strong desire to see this young girl placed in a position where she will be well treated, and indeed comfortably provided for. He

has discovered that she is in your service, Mrs. Messiter: and as she informed him that she was about to leave Dover, I have thought it right to send to you and make you acquainted with all these facts in order to see if my cousin's views can be carried out.'—Thereupon Mrs. Messiter undertook to do her best in inducing you, Mary, to enter her ladyship's service: and now you know how the whole matter was brought about."

I listened to this narrative with feelings so varied that I scarcely know how to explain them. In the first place I experienced a thrill of ineffable pleasure on hearing that I had thus been the object of Eustace Quentin's consideration: my soul seemed to melt with indescribable tenderness as I received these convincing proofs that he had thought of me. Then, the next moment, I felt angry with myself for allowing these very feelings of bliss to harbour even for a moment in my mind. Next I felt that tears were trickling down my cheeks, as I thought of poor Mrs. Messiter launching forth in the goodness of her heart into such eulogies of my character and conduct. I also experienced a sensation of mingled pride and satisfaction at the conviction that those eulogies were, at all events to a considerable extent, deserved on my part. Then, again was I touched in the tenderest point by hearing of the delicate manner in which Eustace Quentin had sought to forward my interests, while he himself kept altogether in the back-ground. Nor less did I feel a profound sentiment of gratitude towards Lady Harlesdon for the kindness which she had shown, and also for the delicacy which had distinguished *her* share in the transaction as well as her cousin's.

"Well, Mary, and what do you think of all I have told you?" asked Jemima, with a look of mingled archness and gaiety. "I really could not help letting out the secret now: I only wonder I have been able to keep it so long! Three whole months! it is indeed a perfect age to put such restraint on one's-self. But don't you begin to understand a great deal of what occurred in the nursery just now? Her ladyship saw that you and Sir Aubrey Clavering recognized each other; and I suppose she instantaneously suspected that Clavering must have been Quentin's fellow-officer who was guilty of so ungentlemanly an outrage towards you, and which led to the duel. And it was natural enough too," continued the garrulous Jemima, "that her ladyship *should* thus suddenly come to that conclusion: for Sir Aubrey was in the same regiment with Eustace Quentin—that regiment was quartered at Canterbury—and Canterbury is not very far from Twisden Lodge, where you were in service. Ah! poor Lady Harlesdon! she is jealous of you——"

"Oh! fie," I exclaimed, the remark seeming altogether as outrageous as indelicate; and the colour mounted to my cheeks.

"Well, you may seem shocked or astonished, whichever it is," observed Jemima: "but what I said is the truth. I can understand it all now as plain as possible. Sir Aubrey Clavering has always been intimate at Harlesdon House—sometimes staying there for months together——"

"I wish you would not speak upon this subject any more," said I. "Your allusions are injurious to our mistress, who is kind and good to us, and who according to your own showing has been particularly kind and good to me. Indeed she stands in the light of a benefactress——"

"I like her ladyship as well as you do," interrupted Jemima: "but that is no reason why we should not have our own chit-chat upon the very things that are passing before our eyes. It is quite clear that Sir Aubrey and her ladyship are very intimate together; and when we look at the likeness of these children to him, it's almost a wonder that her ladyship is not afraid to have him at the house. Dear me! where can my lord's eyes be? One would think that some people are wilfully blind. Ah! no wonder her ladyship should have taken a fancy to Sir Aubrey. What an elegant, fascinating man he is—and quite young too—not five-and-twenty yet, I'll be bound. Such hair, and eyes, and beautiful whiskers, dark as jet——"

"Do pray leave off this idle gossipping," I exclaimed, now exhibiting a feeling of mingled impatience and disgust. "Bes des, it is time to go in," I added, rising from my seat: "it must be close upon one o'clock, and the children's dinner will be ready."

Jemima looked rather annoyed at the abrupt manner in which I cut her short: but she was naturally good-tempered, and her pleasantness of humour speedily returned. I walked quick, in order as it were to preclude any farther discourse; and Jemima was compelled to lag behind a little, as Master Alexander and Master Albert could not keep up with the rapidity of my pace. But scarcely had I entered Grosvenor Square, when I heard a voice exclaim, "Miss Price—Miss Price! It is—and yet it can't be——no, can't be—not likely, not likely."

That voice I instantaneously knew; and looking round, beheld poor Mad Tommy standing against the iron railings belonging to the area of a splendid mansion. He was in a far more wretched plight than ever I had seen him in at Ashford. Clothing, so to speak, he had none—merely a mass of rags hanging upon him in such a manner that it was a perfect mystery and wonder how they kept together at all. He was dreadfully dirty—his hair was a complete mat, and had pieces of hay in it, as if he had last slept under a stack, or in a barn or stable. He had no shoes nor stockings on his feet; and though the weather was certainly glowing with all the warmth of a splendid summer's day, yet was there something cheerless and miserable to a degree in the aspect of this poor young man. The tears gushed into my eyes as with rapid glance I surveyed him from head to foot; and he too seemed to be affected in his own strange way, when he found that it was indeed I—Mary Price—and also that I looked with compassionating sympathy upon him.

"Ah! Miss Price—Miss Price, after all!" he said, rubbing his hands, not exactly together, but over each other. "Thought so—thought so—moment I saw you: but wasn't sure—no, not sure—because grown fine girl—very fine girl. Still mourning on—still mourning on!"

"Yes," I answered, in a sorrowful manner and with a profound sigh; and I glanced down at the half-mourning which I wore, as the two years from the date of the tragedy which deprived me of my parents had not quite passed away. "But what are you doing in London?" I asked.

"Ah! very unfortunate—very unhappy," answered Tommy, shaking his head: then after throwing a suspicious glance around, as if he were afraid of being overheard or watched by persons of whom he stood in terror, he said, "Bad men brought me up to London—promised me good situation—plenty to eat, plenty to drink, and good clothes:"—here he glanced dolefully down at the wretched tatters which hung upon his form, making him seem like a garden scare-crow. "But they wanted me to do wicked things—I would not—not likely, not likely. Ah! those very bad men—deceived poor Tommy!"

"Who were they?" I asked shudderingly; for it had already struck me to whom the unfortunate being alluded.

"Ah! Miss, you know them—bad men, bad men indeed—Nick Sawbridge—Ben Bulldog—no good come of them—not likely, not likely! Poor Tommy ran away from them—Tommy afraid of them:"—and here again he threw a trembling and suspicious look around, as if fearful lest the objects of his alarm should suddenly make their appearance.

"Now, Mary: give that beggar a penny and come along," said Jemima, who at this moment overtook me, leading the two little boys by their hands.

"This is a poor creature," I said, "whom I have known for many years at Ashford:"—then in a hurried voice aside, I whispered, "He is not right in his senses—do not say anything to wound his feelings."

"Not I for the world!" rejoined Jemima. "On the contrary, I will give him sixpence:"—and she at once took the coin from her pocket and put it into his hands.

"Now walk on with the children for a moment," said I; "and I will overtake you directly. I wish to see what can be done for this poor creature."

Jemima accordingly proceeded onward with the two little boys; and the moment she was beyond earshot, I said to Tommy, "Tell me—have you seen anything of my brother Robert in London?"—but he only looked at me very hard and shook his head mournfully. "Tell me, I conjure you," I said, "if you have seen him—if you know what has become of him?——Come," I added coaxingly, "I know you *have* seen him? Tell me, is he with those two men?"

"Yes, yes—he was—don't know whether he is now—think he is—most likely, most likely."

I was about to ask the poor idiot some further questions, when all of a sudden I beheld him start with a sort of convulsive shudder, while his eyes became fixed in a certain direction with a wild and maniac glare. Already anticipating the cause, I looked round, and beheld the unmistakable figures of the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge at a distance, just emerging from one of the streets leading into the square. They instantaneously saw that they were observed, and disappeared as quickly—doubtless having recognized me, and not choosing to meet me in the broad day-light and in a part of London where, if I were so disposed, I could easily give them into custody for the murderous outrage perpetrated upon me at Dover. The sudden evaporation, as it almost seemed, of those two men produced a rapid and visible feeling of relief on the part of Mad Tommy: the horror of consternation subsided, and his eyes lost their wild glare. Still it was easy to perceive that he was now anxious to get away from that neighbourhood in which the two objects of his terror were thus lurking.

Taking a sovereign, which I had saved up, from my pocket, I said, "Do you know how much this is, Tommy?"—but I dropped it on the pavement: for the sight of those two dreadful characters had thrown me into a painful condition of nervous excitement, and I felt not only that I was trembling all over but likewise very pale.

He picked up the coin, and after looking at it for nearly a minute, said, "Yes—I know—I know—that a sovereign—same as twenty shillings. Tommy won't take it of Miss Price—not likely, not likely!"—and thrusting it back again into my hand, he sped away with lightning celerity, darted round the corner, and was out of sight in a moment.

Poor fellow! my heart melted when I thought of his dreadfully impoverished condition, and how much good this sovereign might have done him had he chosen to take it. But I could not possibly speed after him: for in the first place he had shot away like an arrow; and secondly I had the youngest child in my arms. I accordingly hastened onward in mingled agitation and sorrow, to rejoin Jemima; and we entered the house together.

After dinner in the nursery, I retired with the youngest child, Isabella Clementina, into my own bed-room to give way to the various thoughts which were agitating now so conflictingly in my mind. That my brother was most probably in London, along with Sawbridge and the Bulldog, I had every reason to fear; and I shed bitter, burning tears as I reflected upon the dreadful course he was pursuing. Indeed, I shuddered to look into the future: for if I did, I beheld gaols, hulks, and even scaffolds, with all their associated horrors, looming in the distance, like phantoms dimly seen through a mist. What was to be done for that unfortunate young man? I knew not: and vainly did I ask myself the question a thousand times over, till the subject became too dreadful to think of, and I endeavoured to shut it out from my view. Then my thoughts settled upon the narrative which Jemima had told me, and which proved how deeply I was indebted to that amiable and excellent young gentleman, the Hon. Eustace Quentin. Ah! when we parted on the beach at Dover and he suffered me to leave him so abruptly, making no effort to retain me nor to call me back—it was not that he decided upon dismissing me then and there for ever from his memory! No: he had thought of me afterwards—he had found out where I lived: but so far from intruding himself upon me—so far indeed from even running the risk of compromising me by his attentions—he was studying in a secret and unknown manner how to render me a service. And this he had accomplished in a manner so delicate that the favour was a hundred million times enhanced by the very mode in which it was conferred.

Oh! as I gave way to these reflections, I could not help thinking of the great personal beauty of that young man who had thus demonstrated so friendly—so fraternal a feeling towards myself: and I felt that his image had become within the last few hours more impressed upon my heart than ever it was before. Yes: this admission did I make to myself—and it gave me at the same time

a thrill of pleasure and a pang of excruciation—the former at the thought of being regarded with interest by a youth so noble in nature, so handsome, and so intellectual as Eustace Quentin—and the latter at the reflection of how wrong, how foolish, indeed how mad it was of me to indulge in anything like a hope that the dream which was floating, light and impalpable as a gauzy vapour in my imagination, would ever be substantially realized!

By means of a strong effort, I turned the current of my thoughts away from this topic of pleasing pain: and then they settled upon all the hints and allusions that Jemima had thrown out in respect to Lady Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Clavering. It would be only a ridiculous affectation of prudery on my part to pretend that I—then going on for eighteen years of age—did not understand the full import and meaning of the upper nurse-maid's remarks. Yes—I *did* comprehend them; and I will as candidly confess that instead of looking with horror and loathing upon Lady Harlesdon's conduct, I pitied and compassionated her; for, Oh! if she really loved Sir Aubrey Clavering, was it not shocking to contemplate the spectacle of so young and beautiful a creature being wedded to a man old enough to be her grandfather? There was something repugnant to every sentiment of delicacy and to every natural feeling in such an alliance. In a word, the longer I thought upon the subject, the more numerous were the extenuations I found for Lady Harlesdon: because I loved her—I regarded her as a benefactress—and the warmth of my gratitude made me zealous to conjure up every possible argument in her defence.

From this topic did my thoughts gradually wander to the incident which had so recently occurred in the Square in respect to the poor idiot. I felt profoundly sorry for his sad condition: and then I shuddered as I pictured to myself the sinister forms of the Bulldog and Sawbridge lurking about in that neighbourhood. Indeed, the apprehension with which their appearance had filled me, being now revived again, took the form of a presentiment of evil; and I felt a cold tremor steal over me as I said to myself, "These men haunt me like evil phantoms! Are they determined to make war upon every family which receives me into its bosom? First at Twisden Lodge—then at the Messiters'—and is it now to be *here?* If indeed those wretches should mark out as their prey every family into which I enter, I shall in time be hunted by them through the world. Or rather, I shall not dare to set my foot over the threshold of any house, for fear of drawing down upon it an infliction, even as the outcast-murderer carries a curse to every hearth which affords him its hospitality. Ah! William! there was perhaps more truth than you dreamt of in those words which you wrote to me in the anguished haste of the moment, and in which you lamentingly observed that mine seemed to be a sad destiny! But no," I exclaimed aloud, as a sudden inspiration of hope flashed in unto my heart: "God will *not* let the innocent suffer!"—and then instead of any longer continuing to bewail my gloomy destiny, I felt as if an unknown and ineffable consolation were infusing its balm into my soul; and at the same time my thoughts were, by some association or another, reverted to the image of Eustace Quentin.

On the following morning I felt somewhat feverish and indisposed—probably on account of the excitement which I had undergone on the previous day: and when Jemima proposed a walk in the Park, I excused myself on the above plea.

"But you know," she said, "that her ladyship insists upon the baby" (as Isabella was generally called) "being taken out every forenoon at this hour: therefore you ought to rally yourself—particularly as the fresh air may do you good."

"I must really beg you, Jemima, to relieve me of my duty as best you can this morning," said I: "for I can assure you that my head aches to distraction, and I could not even possibly carry that child across the Square. Perhaps her ladyship will allow the children to be taken out for an airing in the carriage?"

"Ah! but I like an hour's walk in the Park much better," said Jemima. "It does one a thousand times more good:"—then, after a few moments' consideration, she added, "Well, although it's not just the thing for an upper nurse-maid to carry a child about in her arms, yet I won't be too aristocratic or too genteel on the present occasion, but will take Bella out for you, if you will amuse the two boys at home. I could not possibly manage them and carry the baby too."

This arrangement was accordingly agreed upon—the Hon. Master Alexander and the Hon. Master Albert remaining in the nursery-parlour with me; while Jemima, like a good-natured creature as she was, took out the Hon. Miss Isabella Clementina for an airing.

An hour passed, during which interval the two little fellows played with their toys—covering the floor with brewer's drays, carts, horses, houses, boxes of bricks, transparent slates, regiments of soldiers, skittles, guns, pistols, bows and arrows, balls, whips, tops, hoops, rollers, drums, tambourines—in fact, a perfect Lowther Arcade exhibited in glorious pell-mell and confusion all over the room. I was occupied in writing two letters—one to William, telling him of my interview with Mad Tommy and the sinister appearance of Sawbridge and the Bulldog: and the other to Mrs. Messiter, informing her of what a good place I had obtained through her kindness, and hoping she would favour me with a line in reply to say how herself and her dear children were. But scarcely had I finished these letters, when I was startled by the sounds of some one rushing with unusual speed up the staircase; and the next moment one of the housemaids burst into the room.

"O Mary!" she cried, with great excitement both of voice and manner: "the poor dear baby—that beautiful Bella—that love of a child——"

"Good heavens! what is the matter?" I asked, springing from my chair.

"The baby—gone—gone!" ejaculated the housemaid.

"Do you mean *dead?*" I exclaimed, actually struck with horror at the idea of so sudden a catastrophe: for the child had gone out in the most perfect health.

"No, no—not dead——stolen!"

"Heavens! stolen?" I echoed, an ice-chill striking to my heart: for I loved the sweet babe, both on its own and its mother's account.

"Yes, stolen!—stolen from Jemima by a couple of gipsies who were pretending to tell her fortune!"

"Oh! is this possible?" I cried. "Could Jemima have been so foolish—so careless——"

But without pausing to detail the hurried and broken remarks which were exchanged between the housemaid and me, I will at once describe what had really taken place. It appears that Jemima with the infant in her arms had strolled into the Park; and the sun being very powerful she sought the shade of that fine cluster of trees known as "the ring," and until late years famous as the resort of duellists. Seating herself upon a bench, as the child was fast aleep, Jemima took forth a pamphlet called the *Norwood Gipsy*, and which had a large picture that unfolded and the subject of which represented the aged heroine of the work in her red cloak, telling the fortune of a simple-looking country lass, the whole coloured in a most flaming manner. How Jemima could have been foolish enough to purchase such a trashy publication, I cannot conceive: but from what then happened to her and from what she subsequently confessed to me, it appears that she had always attached implicit faith to books of fortune-telling as well as to the predictions of gipsies. Well, she was studying with great interest the daub of a picture forming the frontispiece of the pamphlet, when she was suddenly startled by hearing a voice whisper close to her ear, "That's me!" Looking quickly round, she was struck by observing a little old woman, wearing a red cloak, leaning upon a stick, and appearing very decrepid; but a feeling that amounted almost to a superstitious awe, seized upon Jemima, as the conviction struck her that this little old woman bore an exact likeness to the gipsy represented in the picture.

"Fear nothing," said the old woman, observing the effect which her presence had produced upon Jemima: then glancing over her shoulder, she beckoned as if inviting somebody to approach—whereupon another gipsy female made her appearance from behind a large tree. As she advanced at the old woman's bidding, Jemima had an opportunity of scanning her looks, which she did with much curiosity and interest, not unmingled with a superstitious feeling of awe; for this second gipsy-woman was of remarkable beauty. Not only tall in stature, she was upright as a dart and of handsome figure. She wore no cloak, but was dressed in a dark stuff gown, with a coloured apron, and had a fine new silk handkerchief tied loosely over her head. Her hair, though coarse, struck Jemima as being of the deepest and most perfect blackness, with no gloss nor lustre upon it, but black as ebony or as night. Parted in smooth masses above her swarthy forehead, it was gathered up behind the ears, and hung down beneath the silk handkerchief over her back, not in curls, nor even with a wavy flow, but perfectly straight, and yet without the slightest appearance of being hard or wiry. Her eyes were of the deepest black, and piercingly bright, fringed so thickly with the long ebon lashes that the lustre of those orbs was much subdued and even shaded thereby. Her lips were thin and red, revealing two rows of teeth which though somewhat large were white as ivory, and so regular and even that the proudest lady of quality might have envied them. Her complexion was of true Egyptian duskiness, with a tinge of carnation on the cheeks; and the woman altogether had not only a very handsome but also a bold and masculine appearance. As she advanced with slow and stately steps, as if to suit the imposing air which she gave herself, Jemima had full opportunity thus to mark her well; and indeed the superstitious faith which Jemima so implicitly put in the prophetic powers of the gipsy tribe, led her to contemplate with the most earnest attention this splendid specimen of the females of that race.

"I am the Norwood Gipsy, and this is my daughter," whispered the old woman in Jemima's ear. "She is the Queen of her tribe. Behold her well! does not her beauty sit upon her with an effect more majestic than aught which ermine robes or gemmed diadem could confer?"—and while the old woman was thus speaking, the Gipsy Queen (as the handsome female was represented to be) advanced close up to the bench where Jemima was sitting. "Now," continued the old woman, "cross my hand with silver and your fortune shall be told. Does not that book which lies beside you, chronicle the predictions to which I have given utterance for fifty years past, and none of which have ever been falsified? Cross my hand with silver, then: for the presence of my daughter, the Gipsy Queen, is most auspicious for the solemn ceremony."

The foolish Jemima, fully believing that everything thus said to her was perfectly genuine, and with a sensation of mingled suspense, awe, and fluttering expectation, drew forth her purse and produced two half-crowns, which she laid upon the old Norwood Gipsy's open palm. But the wily hag, perceiving that the purse contained more, said, "It is not enough: cover the palm with silver!" Jemima accordingly emptied her purse, containing fifteen or sixteen shillings, into the harridan's hand; and now the old witch seemed contented.

"You are in the service of a noble family," she continued, "and it is a scion of that lordly house which now reposes upon your lap. Amongst the visitors to your noble master's mansion will shortly come a great Prince from foreign parts; and he will be smitten with your beauty, and regardless of your humble position, will offer you his hand. The first proposal will be made in secret; and you must refuse him. The second will be made by letter; but he will forget to put his name, and therefore must you take no notice of it. But the third time he will openly offer you marriage in the presence of your noble master and mistress and a host of their friends. Then may you accept him. Your bridal will be magnificent; and as a Princess will you accompany your husband to his ancient castle and vast estates in the country to which he belongs."

Jemima was intoxicated by this splendid picture which the old gipsy drew and which she coloured with many details that are not recorded here, from the simple fact that I have forgotten them. Jemima was certainly a good-looking young woman—not actually vain, but somewhat frivolous; and as the reader has already seen, she was possessed of an inordinate amount of silly credulity. Her head therefore swam with ecstatic pleasure at the gorgeous future which the Norwood Gipsy sketched out for her; and while still under the intoxicating

influence of golden hopes and fairy anticipations, the Gipsy Queen said to her in a solemn but pleasing voice, "My venerable mother, the greatest of all prophetesses, has told you true, young woman, in every respect: and humble as you are now, yet are you destined to become a great Princess. You will wear splendid clothes—be covered with the costliest jewels—dwell in a palace—have hosts of servants to wait upon you—and ride in a beautiful carriage drawn by four cream-coloured horses. Your husband the Prince will be young and handsome—tall and dark—dressing with great elegance and wearing a star upon his breast."

"And will all this come to pass soon?" inquired Jemima, her head losing itself with the intoxicating sense of gratified pride and ineffable happiness.

"Yes, truly," replied the Gipsy Queen, to whom the foolish young woman's question was addressed: "within a year from the present time."

"But behold!" suddenly exclaimed the old Norwoon harridan, assuming a weird and mystic look: "the future is revealing other things to me. *Three* Princes will within the coming year be introduced at the mansion of your noble master and mistress. All three will be handsome, and in most respects answering the description which my daughter has just given you. But one is destined to be deprived of his estates by his despotic Sovereign; and another is foredoomed to die early by a fall from his horse when hunting? The remaining one will live prosperously and happily to a good old age; and *he* it is whom *you* ought to marry!"

"But what," exclaimed the infatuated Jemima, "if each of the three foreign Princes should make me an offer—how am I to know which is the one I ought to select?"

"Would you like to behold the image of him on whom you should bestow your hand?" asked the old Norwood Gipsy: "for I dare not tell you his name." Jemima joyfully accepted the proposal of the hag, who proceeded to observe, "Be it so! but your eyes must be blindfolded."

To this Jemima, who was very far from suspecting any treacherous conduct, at once gave her cordial assent; and taking off her bonnet, she suffered the gipsy-mother to bind the handkerchief round her eyes. At that very moment the child who had hitherto been sleeping soundly on Jemima's lap, woke up and began to cry; whereupon the old gipsy exclaimed in a tone expressive of vexation, "Ah! these sounds will spoil the charm; and unless you hush them, the image of your princely lover will not appear before you!"

"Let me take the child and hold it for a minute," cried the Gipsy Queen. "I am fond of children and can doubtless manage to quiet this little beauty."

Thereupon Jemima felt the child lifted off her lap: but infatuated as she was—absorbed with the intoxicating sense of one dominant idea—she was still very far from suspecting aught that savoured of treachery; and as Miss Isabella's crying almost instantaneously ceased, there now seemed to be no hindrance to the effectual working of the charm. At least so thought poor Jemima!

"Remain quiet—move not—keep your eyes shut close underneath the handkerchief!" said the Norwood Gipsy; "and in a few minutes you will behold a luminous mist arise, in the middle of which will appear the image of the Prince on whom you are to bestow your hand."

Accordingly, in obedience to these strict injunctions, Jemima sat motionless as a statue upon the bench, not only completely blindfolded by the handkerchief, but also squeezing her eyelids close so as to shut out any glimmering of the sun-light, lest it should mar the luminous glory of the halo which was to arise and reveal to her the form of her princely husband. But three or four minutes elapsed, and all continued as dark as pitch. Not a scintillation of anything like a preternatural lustre rose up to her mental vision: and now it began to strike her that the silence which prevailed around was most complete—unbroken by even so much as the rustling of a garment or the sound of any one breathing. Instead of the lustre rising up to her view, a suspicion of treachery began to develop itself in her mind: but putting it away from her, as it were, she said, "My good dame, as yet I behold nothing." No reply was given: the continued silence alarmed her—and tearing off the handkerchief, she threw her frightened, anxious looks around. Good heavens! she was alone: the gipsies were gone, and had taken the child with them! Overcome with the horrible feelings which now fastened upon her, the wretched Jemima fainted.

When she came to herself and recollection gradually returned, she could scarcely believe that what had occurred was otherwise than a dreadful dream. But when she saw that she was indeed alone and that the child was gone, her anguish broke out in passionate sobs and bitter weeping. That part of the Park was quite deserted at the time; and her lamentations reached no ear, and drew the attention of no one towards her. Starting wildly up, she threw her bonnet on her head and began running half frantic in every direction. But nothing could she see of the gipsies: they were gone;—and having just sufficient presence of mind remaining to make her feel the necessity of giving the alarm as soon as possible, she hurried homeward. At some distance from the trees she met one of the Park-keepers, whom she informed of what had occurred; and he promised to commence an immediate search throughout the Park and acquaint the other officials of what had taken place. The unhappy Jemima then sped home to Harlesdon House; but on hastening into her ladyship's presence the poor young woman was so overcome by her feelings that she could not immediately tell the doleful tale. A restorative was administered; and then she revealed the fearful tidings, to the almost frenzied anguish of Lady Harlesdon.

Lord Harlesdon was present at the time, as was also Sir Aubrey Clavering: for it was into the drawing-room that Jemima had burst with frantic looks on returning to the house. Lady Harlesdon went into hysterics—his lordship rang the bell violently for the domestics—while Sir Aubrey Clavering overwhelmed Jemima with the bitterest and most vehement reproaches. The unhappy young woman fainted once more; but the servants who came rushing up in obedience to his lordship's furious and continuous pealing at the bell, at once proceeded to administer all necessary attentions to both mistress and maid. The valets, footmen, and all the male dependants were at once dispersed in different directions. One was sent to get bills printed and circulated, offering a reward of five hundred guineas

another was despatched to put the local constabulary upon the alert; and the rest set off to institute a search all about the neighbourhood of the Park. Then, as Lady Harlesdon was in some measure restored—and at all events was bracing herself with all the fortitude possible under such dreadful circumstances—Jemima, who was likewise more composed, proceeded to give that rapid outline of the narrative which I have already laid before the reader, and which she herself subsequently detailed to me at length.

Such was the terrible incident which all in a moment brought anguish, horror, and dismay into Harlesdon House. For myself, I was deeply, deeply grieved—not merely because I loved the child, as I have before said, but also for the sake of its mother who had been so kind and good to me. Besides, I could not think without a cold shudder—indeed a continuous feeling of dismay—on what the destiny of the poor little innocent might be: but through all the dark clouds of sorrow and affliction which had thus suddenly enveloped the entire household, there was one gleam of hope. This was suggested by a Bow Street officer who came in the course of the day to learn the particulars of the occurrence; and his opinion was that the child had only been stolen for the sake of the reward which was expected to be offered for its restoration. The hope thus held out served to some extent to console poor Lady Harlesdon, or at all events to enable her to bear up under the cruel blow: but as for Jemima, she was taken very ill—was seized with hysterical fits—became delirious—and in a few hours was pronounced by the doctors to be in great danger.

It was in the middle of the day when the deplorable occurrence became known at Harlesdon House; and it was close upon six o'clock in the evening before all the domestics who had been dispersed about, returned home again. Their in-

quiries and their researches had all been vain and ineffectual; nor had the Park-keepers experienced any better success. Nothing had been gleaned relative to the gipsies: in fact no woman in a red cloak nor any with a silk handkerchief bound about her head had been seen in the Park the whole day. That the gipsies had therefore first of all entered the Park in a quiet way and with unattractive garb, seemed most probable: that they had then assumed the characteristics of their dress amongst the trees for the time being and just before they revealed themselves to Jemima, appeared equally certain: but that they had again laid aside those peculiarities of dress—namely, the red cloak of the one and the silk handkerchief of the other—ere emerging forth from the shade of the trees again, was the natural sequence of the former suppositions. That the carrying off of the child had therefore been planned beforehand, was strongly to be inferred; and this belief was strengthened by the circumstance of the gipsies displaying their knowledge that Jemima was *in the service of a noble family*—a statement they would not have hazarded at random, because if false it might have tended to excite suspicions. Therefore, that they really knew Jemima to be Lady Harlesdon's servant and the child to belong to the Harlesdon family, was tolerably certain. Was it not therefore clear, all other circumstances considered, that the abduction had been previously planned? If this were the case, there could be no other motive than the extortion of money; and thus was it that the opinion of the Bow Street officer excited the hope which was so necessary to ward off the anguish of despair.

CHAPTER XVI.

A HOPE FROM A STRANGE QUARTER.

I HAVE already said that it was six o'clock when all the servants returned from their ineffectual search. It was now the dinner hour in the banquetting-room; but Lady Harlesdon experienced no inclination for food. Her husband, who bore his misfortune more philosophically, did not abstain from taking refreshment, but sat down to table with Sir Aubrey Clavering, who, as a guest, was compelled by courtesy to bear his lordship company—although, from what I heard, he appeared to feel the calamity even more acutely than Lord Harlesdon himself.

It was about half-past six when one of her ladyship's maids came up into the nursery and desired me to take the two boys down into the drawing-room. I at once obeyed; and the moment her two little sons were brought into Lady Harlesdon's presence, she caught them up in her arms with a kind of frenzy, strained them to her bosom, and covered them with her kisses and her tears. The lady's-maid who had brought me the summons, had not entered the drawing-room with me; and I was now about to retire, thinking that her ladyship might choose, in the painful state of her feelings, to be alone with her two children; but she said in a sweet plaintive voice, "You can stay, Mary."

I accordingly remained: but Lady Harlesdon continued to weep and lament over her children, thus finding a vent for the grief which wrung her soul on account of that other child of which she had been so cruelly bereaved. There was something so sacred in this agonizing grief on the part of the young mother, that I dared not stand to gaze upon it: it was something too solemn to be intruded upon by the looks of even one who sympathised so deeply as I did. Moreover, my own heart was swelling almost to bursting, and the tears were raining down my cheeks: I felt sobs rising up into my throat—and indeed I was well nigh convulsed with anguish, not only on account of the melancholy spectacle then present, but because I thought that if it were possible for the poor absent babe to be ill-treated by those wretches who had stolen it——Ah! I cannot find words to express how much I felt!

To avoid, therefore, intruding as it were with my gaze upon the sacredness of Lady Harlesdon's grief, and also to prevent that spectacle from producing a violent outburst of my own, I turned aside and advanced to one of the windows which looked upon the Square. My eyes were so filled with scalding tears that at first I beheld nothing; but having wiped away those tears, I gazed forth unconsciously and mechanically—and still was I gazing upon vacancy. Gradually however there came a clearness into my vision; and slowly did my looks settle upon a person who was leaning against the iron railings of the enclosure of shrubs in the middle of the Square. It being scarcely seven o'clock in the evening, and in the middle of June, it was of course perfect daylight; and indeed the slant beams of the sun came glinting against the windows from the western horizon. Therefore not only did I plainly perceive that figure posted against the railings opposite the window, but could at once distinguish the dilapidated scarecrow form of Mad Tommy!

He saw that he had caught my eye, and made me an impatient sign to come out to him. Quick as lightning did the suspicion flash to my mind that the poor fellow's object in wishing to see me was in some way connected with the stolen child; and without any hesitation did I nod an assent. He then pointed in a particular direction, and at once moved rapidly off in the same line that he thus indicated.

For a few moments I paused to reflect how I should manage in order to accomplish my aim. I did not choose to enter into particulars at that moment when Lady Harlesdon had so much upon her mind; and the invention of a false excuse was most repugnant to my feelings. So, summoning all my firmness to my aid, I accosted my noble mistress, saying, "Will your ladyship spare me for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour?"

Lady Harlesdon scarcely seemed to understand the question, so profoundly was she absorbed in the melancholy reverie to which the violence of her grief had given place—while the two little children, leaning upon her knees, were gazing up plaintively into her countenance. She only nodded her head in reply to the permission which I asked; but it was enough, and I hastened from the room.

A sort of feverish hope had been excited in my breast by this little incident connected with the poor idiot; and I sped up-stairs to my own room to put on my bonnet and shawl. This being done in a moment, I flitted down again, issued from the

house, and hurried along through the Square in the direction in which Mad Tommy had pointed.

"He evidently desires to see me," I thought to myself. "But is it with an idiot's low cunning that he wishes the interview to take place elsewhere than in sight of the house?—or is it with a more refined sentiment of sagacity, or even delicacy, on his part? thus proving that the light of intellect burns more brightly at one time than at another in his mind, and on the present occasion makes him feel the incongruity of a poor wretched being in tatters like himself being seen in conversation with a well-dressed dependant in the household of a noble family?"

As I was balancing these reflections in my mind, and wondering what he could want with me,—hoping too that it might be in connexion with the stolen babe,—I observed him loitering half way down Charles Street, leading out of the Square, and towards which he had pointed when I was looking from the window. No sooner did he observe that I was coming, than he walked still farther on, and suddenly disappeared from my view. Still I continued my way; and on reaching the point where he had vanished, I beheld him waiting under the gateway leading into a stable-yard. His appearance was as miserable as I had noticed it to be on the previous day and as I have already described it: but I could not help remarking with a feeling not only of pleasure but also of increasing hope, that there was something more earnest, more serious, more fixed, so to speak, in his gaze and manner than I had ever observed on any previous occasion during the many years I had known him. Not that he seemed fully sensible: alas! far from it, poor fellow!—but he certainly *did* seem less crazed, less inane, and less vacant in his look.

"Miss Price," he said, catching the black fringe of my shawl between fingers that were almost equally black with grime, "glad you have come—had been watching there off and on for some hours; but didn't like to stick there altogether. Afraid of beadle—drive poor Tommy away."

"Well," said I speaking to him in as kind a voice as possible; "what do you want with me? Will you accept——"

"No—not *that*—not *that*," he interrupted me with a sort of impatience, or rather petulance, as if he felt that he could not make himself understood so promptly as he wished, and indeed that his ideas for the moment were clearer than his faculties of expressing them. "Quite another business—quite, quite!"—then flinging quick and uneasy looks up and down the stable-yard, he said, "I saw it all—everything—and know the women too——Ah! but they didn't see me! Tommy hid behind a tree. I know the nursemaid too—good young woman—gave Tommy sixpence yesterday—*that* made me remember her."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, unable at first to give utterance to a single word in the joy which seized upon me with the violence of a paroxysm, as the idiot's words confirmed my pre-conceived hope: "you know those women, then? Ah! come with me at once—come and tell my dear mistress these happy tidings!"—and catching him by the hand, I strove to drag him along with me.

"No, no—not so fast," he exclaimed, remaining immoveable where he stood. "You don't know—dreadful place, dreadful place those women went to—bad women, gipsies! Besides, Tommy do all this in his own way; but Tommy promise you to get back the child."

"Thanks—ten thousand, thousand thanks!" I exclaimed, pressing the poor fellow's hand as warmly and as fervently as if he had been my brother; and the tears of gratitude trickled down my cheeks. "But when will you do it? how will you do it? Come, my good friend, do let me entreat you to go with me——"

"No, no," interrupted he, flinging away my hand sullkily—almost savagely. "If Tommy does it at all, does it in his own way—not going to let you have your way. You know nothing about it—not likely, not likely."

"Well then, you *shall* have it all your own way," said I soothingly. "But in whatever proceeding you are going to adopt, may I not accompany you—may I not go with you? Think—consider—is it not possible I could be of some use? From what you said I suppose those women have taken the child to some dreadful place——And ah!" I ejaculated as a sudden thought struck me, "perhaps those men Sawbridge and the Bulldog are connected with the affair?"

"Yes, yes—that's it—that's it!" exclaimed Tommy, all his good humour returning as he looked with a sort of knowing earnestness up into my countenance. "They know you—they do you a mischief: but Tommy disguise himself—Ah! he knows how to do it. Tommy very cunning at times!"

"Well," said I, hurried on by the enthusiasm of a courage which would have made me dare anything for the sake of recovering the lost infant and restoring it to its mother's arms: "you speak of disguise—could not I disguise myself and go with you? I am sure I should be useful. Now, Tommy," I continued, perceiving that if I humoured him I should carry my point, "I know you are very cunning—very cunning indeed—and you can therefore think of some means to enable me to accompany you and to make me useful when I am with you."

As I spoke these words Tommy's countenance grew serious and reflective: then he put his hand up to his forehead as if to steady his thoughts; and as he removed that hand again and fixed his eyes upon my countenance, it struck me that he now looked even more sane than he had appeared at the first moment of this interview.

"Well, well," he said at length, speaking in a slower tone and in a more connected manner than ever I had heard him before,—"you shall come with me, Miss Price. I think it will be better—yes, much better. You may be useful—we shall manage it together. I have got it already settled *here*:"—and he tapped his forehead significantly. "Shan't forget it—not likely, not likely."

"Am I to go with you now?" I asked.

"No—daylight—daylight—won't do, won't do," he responded, again losing the power of continuity in his phrases. "When it's dusk—quite dusk, you know—dark—after sunset—then you come to me here—just here—this very place."

"That will be between nine and ten o'clock," said I.

"Well, Tommy count the clock—can count ten—and will be here."

With these words he suddenly sped away just as I was about to put my hand into my pocket and give him some money: but the next moment he re-appeared with equal abruptness, and gliding up to me, said, "Miss Price must bring money with her—as much money as that gold-piece—twenty shillings—quite as much—we shall want it. Yes—and more too."

"Now then, will you take some money to get some nice food——"

But without permitting me to finish the sentence, he turned away again and fled precipitately.

I hastened back towards Harlesdon House, eager to impart to my beloved mistress the joyous tidings that there was hope. But as I entered the mansion, the thought suddenly struck me that if I went into full explanations, her ladyship would probably forbid me to run such a fearful risk as to seek the company of the desperate characters who were mixed up in this affair. She would consult her husband and Sir Aubrey Clavering—they might insist upon making use of Mad Tommy's services to guide them with a posse of constables to the *dreadful place* to which he had alluded as the haunt of those characters—and any such endeavour to deter the idiot from his own way of conducting the affair would at once throw him into a sullen humour in which he would doggedly refuse any farther interference in the matter at all. Indeed, knowing him as well as I did, I was fully aware of the necessity of letting him have his own way; and I did not for a moment dread to trust myself with him in the venture—for I knew that even in cases of the most confirmed idiotcy, there is often a certain cunning flowing through the mistiness of the confused intellect and serving many special purposes much better that even the complete lucidity of the sane individual.

All these considerations made me determined to enter as little into particulars as possible with Lady Harlesdon—and not at all unless absolutely compelled. Having laid aside my bonnet and shawl, I went back to the drawing-room, where her ladyship was still alone with her two children. She seemed more composed than when I left her half-an-hour back—or rather she had her feelings more under command.

"Well, Mary, where have you been?" she asked, in a gentle and kind tone; but it was evidently only for the sake of saying something, and not through any actual curiosity to learn the cause of my temporary absence.

"I wish your ladyship would do me a favour:" —and as I felt that I was speaking mysteriously, it was no wonder that there was something in my look and manner which struck her as peculiar.

"What is it?" she asked, gazing up fixedly at me as I stood before her.

"My request will doubtless seem a very singular one," I said; "but still I hope your ladyship has sufficient confidence in me to give me credit for an utter absence of any improper intention."

"Do tell me what you mean, Mary," exclaimed my noble mistress, astonishment now appearing upon her countenance.

"I wish for leave to go out this evening at ten o'clock, and to remain away two, three, or four hours—I cannot say how many—perhaps indeed all night."

"Good heavens, Mary! what have you got in your head?" exclaimed her ladyship, full of surprise but with no expression of anger: then ere I could reply she went on to say, "There is something strange about you—and yet it is a solemn and a serious strangeness, as if you had some fixed purpose in your mind—some settled plan to carry out. But you are so young to wear such a look as this! There is an energy about you that makes you appear in a new and quite unusual light."

"All that your ladyship has said is the exact truth," I answered. "Yes—I *have* indeed a settled purpose in my head: but I beseech you to ask me no questions now. Need I assure your ladyship that it is relative to—to——" and here my voice faltered.

"Ah! you are a good, an excellent, and kind-hearted girl," exclaimed Lady Harlesdon, the tears starting forth upon her lashes. "But my poor Mary, with the best inclination in the world, and with all the energy of a heroine, you cannot do more than has already been done and is still doing."

"Pardon me, my lady," I cried, almost vehemently; "your ladyship cannot understand—cannot appreciate——In fact, it is my secret—I beseech your ladyship to let me have my own way without questioning me any farther, and also without breathing to a soul a hint that anything is being done by me—and if it should prove ineffectual on my part, no harm will result."

"But it is my duty, Mary," observed Lady Harlesdon, with tremulous voice and yielding manner—for I saw she had caught the infection of that hopefulness which shone forth in the energy of my looks and the earnestness of my words, although she could not possibly have the remotest suspicion of what the ground of that hopefulness on my part was: "it is my duty to see that you do not thrust yourself into any danger. Indeed, I never should forgive myself if, granting you this permission which you seek, any harm should befall you."

"I am determined to go, my lady," said I in a firm voice. "If by so doing I incur your displeasure, I shall be deeply grieved: but heaven knows it is with the sincerest, the purest motive."

"My displeasure—no!" exclaimed Lady Harlesdon emphatically. "I am not capable of repaying your sublime generosity in such a heartless manner. Go, my dear girl. I will make some efficient excuse to the maids for your absence; and they shall take charge of these children for to-night. Go then—and God bless you!"

She gave me her hand, which I pressed to my lips; and then hastily turning away, I quitted the room. Ascending to the nursery, I remained there until it wanted five minutes to ten o'clock—when I resumed my bonnet and shawl, descended the back staircase, and managed to escape out of the house unobserved by any of my fellow-servants.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DISGUISE.

THE clocks were striking ten as I hurried along to the place of appointment; and there was Mad Tommy waiting for me. Indeed, the moment he heard my footsteps approaching the stable entrance he emerged thence; and as the light of the adjacent lamp flashed upon his countenance, I could observe that it had a seriousness and fixity of purpose which gave his look an expression even more sane than it was in the most lucid moment of our previous interview.

"Miss Price, follow me at a distance," he said: and then making a sort of imperious sign to show that he was resolved to be obeyed, he turned upon his heel and sped along the street.

On he went, I following at a little distance; and every now and then he looked back to assure himself that I had not lost sight of him. In this manner did we proceed through the streets, taking an easterly direction: but I was too much absorbed in the exciting nature of my thoughts to observe very particularly the route which we thus took. Besides, I had implicit faith not only in Tommy's good intentions, but also in the sagacity and cunning (whichever it may be termed) that he was displaying in the present adventure. Not but that I felt it was a very important and likewise a dangerous enterprise in which I was embarked; but though thus sensible to the risk I was running, I did not for a moment shrink from it. On the contrary, I was not merely sustained by the conviction that I was performing a true Christian duty, but I was also hurried onward by a species of enthusiasm amounting to what may be termed a positive heroism.

For about half-an-hour did Tommy conduct me through the wide and open streets, the lamps enabling me to keep him easily in view, although he persisted in walking at some distance in front. But presently he stopped short; and when I came up with him, he said in a mysterious manner, "Miss Price won't be frightened—Tommy take care of her—wouldn't lead her into danger if he could help it—not likely, not likely."

Having thus spoken, he continued to advance a few yards, and then turned somewhat abruptly into a dark alley or court, whither I immediately followed him. For nearly a minute we proceeded onward in the deepest obscurity, through which a faint glimmering of light presently appeared, struggling mistily from the half-glazed windows of a house. Here we stopped; and Tommy knocked thrice in a peculiar manner at the door, in which a little trap about six inches square was almost immediately opened, and the sinister face of an old woman appeared by the light which was shining inside.

"Who is it?" she demanded in a quick voice; and her eyes seemed to fling glances sharp as needles through the little opening in order to scan our visages.

"Me—Tommy—Bulldog's man," was the answer which my companion immediately gave; and I could not help thinking at the moment that he had his wits about him lucidly enough *now*, though still their promptings were evidently of a strange and peculiar character.

"Oh! it's you, is it, Tommy?" said the old woman: and the little trap-door was immediately closed.

Then I heard the sounds of bolts drawn back and of a chain being removed; and for an instant a cold tremor swept over me as I thought that this must be some terrible place indeed into which I was about to enter. But my courage did not fail me. On the contrary, all my fortitude at once returned to my aid, as the door opened and Tommy led the way, full of confidence, across the threshold. I followed close; and as we entered a long narrow passage lighted by a candle which the old woman held in her hand, she hastily shut the front door, which was massive and heavy. She then drew the bolts and put up the chain once more; and while thus employed I surveyed her with attention. She was at least sixty years of age—thin, even to emaciation—and with so forbidding an expression of countenance that she looked capable of any crime under the sun. She was dressed in an old rusty dark stuff gown; and her grey grizzly hair straggled forth from under a dirty white cap.

Scarcely had I taken this survey of the woman, when a door in the passage opened and a man came forth whose hideous aspect struck me with so sudden a horror that I wonder I did not shriek forth. He was of a very great age, and must have been tall when his form was erect: but he was now bent to a curve resembling the arc of a bow. His leanness was painful to behold: he looked like a living skeleton, so blighted, shrivelled, and withered was he. His face was of spectral aspect: I can liken the skin to nothing else than wetted parchment hanging in a myriad wrinkles, or rather baggy furrows, down the cheeks and under the chin. Two small grey eyes, twinkling with a sinister gleam, prevented this shocking countenance from being absolutely corpse-like: but the glances which those eyes shot forth from under two ragged curtains of eye-lids, were full of blended treachery and suspicion. The ghastliness of that dreadful man's countenance was enhanced by the black silk skull-cap which he wore, and from underneath the hem of which straggled forth a few grey hairs which seemed indeed to form a fringe of thin lanky threads for that greasy, rusty skull-cap.

I have not in the least exaggerated the hideous—I may even say the *awful* description of this man; and when I add that an old suit of black clothes seemed to hang upon him as if it were a mere skeleton which had been in mockery dressed up to imitate the living being, my readers will admit that the sudden appearance of such an individual was enough to send a thrill of horror through my frame. Tommy at once perceived the effect produced upon me; and he hastened to reassure me in his own strange and eccentric way.

"Master of the house—very useful man—never do harm to those who pay him. This is his wife—good woman too in her way. Both good people in their way. Do anything for money—ask no questions—not likely, not likely."

"Well, Tommy, this is a pretty lass you've brought here," said the old man, in so shaking, quaking, quivering a tone that it seemed as if uttered by one who was all the time shivering and trembling with the cold.

"Aye, she's a tidy lass," observed the old woman,

who, having bolted the door, now eyed me with peculiar attention.

"Come now—no time for gossip," Tommy hastened to observe: then turning towards me, he said, "Give money—give money—and old people do what we want—eh, Mr. Byles—eh?"

"To be sure," answered the old man, with a chuckle as tremulous and quavering as his speech, and ending in a cough which appeared to shake him almost out of existence: "anything, as you say, Tommy, for money. But where are your friends the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge?"

"Never mind—no time to talk now," answered Tommy, quickly. "Miss Price—money, money."

I had already taken my purse from my pocket; and producing a guinea, I placed it in the palm which the old man extended; it seemed as if the contact of the gold produced an ecstatic effect, conjuring up a pleasant smile to his countenance—if indeed any expression which those spectral features could wear were capable of appearing pleasant.

"Now, Miss Price," said Tommy, "you go with old woman, Mrs. Byles. She give you disguise—make you look so that you won't know yourself."

"Aye, that I will," cried the hag, her own sinister features relaxing into a grim sort of smile. "Come with me, my dear;"—and passing along the passage, she led the way up an old ricketty staircase, abominably dirty, and the walls of which were of sooty blackness.

Tommy remained with the old man below; and I heard them enter the room on the ground-floor together, the door being then shut. These sounds reached my ears as I paused on a little landing at the head of the staircase, while Mrs. Byles unlocked one of three doors which appeared there. She then led the way into a room which at once struck me as being a magazine or warehouse to receive the plunder of all the thieves in London. The walls were arranged with shelves from floor to ceiling; and those shelves were crowded with such a miscellaneous assortment of articles that it would be impossible to enumerate even a tithe of them. Garments of all kinds, belonging to both sexes, and representing almost every grade in the social sphere—piles of pocket handkerchiefs—heaps of pocket-books—quantities of bibles and prayer-books—saucepans, gridirons, and brass candlesticks—mantel ornaments, china, and crockery of all kinds, sizes, and shapes—fenders, fire-irons, hearthrugs, pieces of carpet, and door-mats—carriage-lamps, harness, and horse-cloths—baker's sacks, wooden measures, and scales—books in sufficient numbers and of such varied character as to constitute a large library of a most miscellaneous description—all kinds of nick-nacks usually seen in drawing-rooms—leaden ink-stands, publicans' pewter pots, and Dutch clocks—barometers and hour-glasses—umbrella-stands, and even moveable door-scrapers—heaps of pieces of rusty iron, cordage, rope, and string—clothes' lines and clothes' pegs—baskets of all descriptions—pictures, frames, and looking-glasses—snuff-boxes, toilette-materials, knives, forks, and kitchen spoons—children's toys, &c., &c. These may be taken as a sample of the infinite variety of goods which were crammed upon the shelves, piled upon tables, or littered about on the floor in the spacious warehouse to which Mrs. Byles had conducted me.

"Ah! my dear, you seem astonished at what you see," she said, her grim features again relaxing into a smile; "but all the rest of the house is pretty well crowded in the same way:"—and as she thus spoke she fixed her eyes with a peculiar expression upon me, no doubt to observe the effect which the aspect of the place and her words had jointly produced.

I however veiled my astonishment as much as possible; for I thought that it would not do to seem too much of a novice in such a place, for fear of being taken for a spy. Nevertheless, my mind was filled with uneasy sensations; for it was impossible not to understand that this house was a depository for stolen goods, and it did me harm to think that circumstances had led me to breathe so tainted an atmosphere. However, putting the best possible face upon the matter, I said to the old woman, "You doubtless understand why I have been introduced hither—or, in plain terms, why I seek your aid?"

"Yes," at once replied the woman: "I suppose you want to be disguised, as Mad Tommy hinted down stairs? I don't ask any questions, and you needn't tell me more than you like. In fact, I would rather not know anything about it. You have paid your money in advance, and that's enough. Now then, suppose I make a nigger girl of you?"

I confess that I started involuntarily at this proposition, which Mrs. Byles perceiving, at once said, "You needn't be afraid: the dye that I shall use will all wash off again with a little hot water, soap, and soda. But first of all let us look out for a dress that will suit you."

Thereupon she measured my height with a glance; and forthwith producing a quantity of female apparel from one of the shelves, she said, "Here, any one of these gowns will fit you. Now take your choice."

Having gleaned sufficient from Mad Tommy's remarks to make me aware that it was to some dreadful low place I was to be that night introduced in my search after the lost child, I felt assured that I could not be dressed in too poor a manner; and I therefore chose a wretched rag of a cotton dress, the originally dark pattern of which was rendered more dingy by dirt, stains, and grease spots. Indeed, I loathed the idea of putting it on: but it was absolutely necessary, and I therefore conquered my repugnance.

The dress being accordingly selected, Mrs. Byles conducted me into a little bedroom opening from the same landing as the warehouse; and there did I pass through the ordeal of my loathsome toilette. Taking a large stone bottle from a cupboard, Mrs. Byles poured forth some of its contents into a saucer. This fluid was black as ink, of about the consistency of thin oil, and exhaling a nasty rancid odour. By means of a small brush she covered my face and neck with this revolting dye; and during the process my heart heaved against the nauseating smell. But the stuff dried on almost as quickly as it was applied: and by the time the work was done—which indeed only occupied about five minutes—I ceased to perceive that there was any unpleasant odour at all. The same process was applied to my hands and wrists; and when completed, I looked at myself in the glass. Oh! how I shuddered as I caught the

reflection of my now sable features; and irresistibly did the thought strike me how dreadful it would be if the dye should prove ineffaceable and keep me a horrible blackamoor all my life! But the next moment I felt assured that this could not be, and indeed that the woman had no possible motive in playing me so cruel a trick. To be brief, I put off my own mourning apparel, and assumed the wretched garb that was to complete my disguise. Changed indeed I was! A false front of coarse ragged black hair, was half covered with the large frill of a dirty cap; and this again was surmounted by an old battered straw bonnet. The cotton dress came high up in the neck, and had long sleeves. Over my shoulders a scanty plaid shawl was thrown; and I exchanged my neat walking-boots for a pair of heavy clumsy shoes.

"Now I defy the nearest and dearest relation you have in the world to recognize you!" said Mrs. Byles, evidently surveying with no little admiration the effects of her handiwork, as exhibited in my person. "Whatever business you have in hand, if you only play your cards well, you *must* succeed. But mind, it won't do to be *too* genteel. You must alter your walk as much as ever you can; and as for speaking in that pretty soft voice of your's, will never do. You must talk as if the words came up from a throat down which gin and beer are tolerably often poured. But however, all this is your look-out."

I could scarcely thank the woman for the advice which she thus gave me—it smote so horribly upon my ears! Indeed, I felt for the moment as if I were actually committing some crime in what I was doing. My face, neck, and hands had a sensation just as if they were thickly plastered over with mortar; and the feeling was not merely uncomfortable in itself, but too well calculated to make me feel degraded in my own estimation and disgusted at the part I was playing. But when I again reflected how great would be my satisfaction if I succeeded in recovering the lost child, and how immense would be the reward I should reap in the contemplation of the mother's joy when receiving the beloved infant back into her arms,—I at once discarded all selfish considerations, and braced my nerves with resolution to carry out the adventure to the end.

Mrs. Byles now conducted me down stairs again; and at the same moment that we reached the passage below, the side door opened and her hideous husband came forth. He was followed by Mad Tommy, in whose person a transformation had taken place in the same style and quite as perfect as my own. That is to say, he also had been changed into a negro. His face, ears, neck, and hands—indeed, as much of his skin as was anywhere visible—was now of the perfect blackamoor dye; and I was at once struck by the life-like appearance which it had. The most experienced eye could not possibly have penetrated the deceit: the complexion was the precise shade of sooty blackness, with the faintest possible gloss, that forms the characteristic of the negro's skin. A mat of woolly hair covered his crown, and had so natural an appearance as to defy the discovery that it was a wig. He was dressed in a very shabby suit of black, and certainly looked the *black man* to perfection.

That he was equally struck and indeed satisfied with my appearance, was evidenced by the smile of delight that suddenly sprang up in his countenance on beholding me; and yet the next moment I could observe that it was succeeded by an expression of regret, as if he repented having allowed me to embark in an enterprise which required a transformation that so little became me.

"Now then," said Mrs. Byles, "you can sally forth upon your adventures. But do you mean to come back to-night?" she asked, addressing the question to me: "because if so, I must sit up to let you in and help you to undo your disguise."

"Yes—back to-night—back to-night," exclaimed Tommy, answering for me. "At least hope so—hope so. Not stay away longer than necessary—not likely, not likely. Now, Miss Price—come along, come along."

While he was thus speaking, the old woman had opened the front door: and I tripped forth first in order to convince my companion that I was still as resolute and determined as ever to pursue the present enterprise to the end.

"Now," said Tommy as we continued our way farther along the narrow alley into which we had emerged again, "Miss Price must do exactly what Tommy tells her. Tommy must pass as her brother—but deaf and dumb. Poor Tommy must be deaf and dumb," he repeated with increased emphasis. "You pretend to be Tommy's sister—very kind, very good to her poor nigger brother!"—and now he laughed outright, his fancy evidently much tickled with the idea to which he had just given utterance.

This was only another proof of the strange sagacity, or cunning, which the poor fellow exhibited throughout the adventure of that ever memorable night. He evidently knew full well that if he spoke he should at once betray himself: for though he was entirely sensible to his own defective speech and broken mode of utterance, yet he had not sufficient command over his ideas to give more fluent and voluble expression to them. Conscious, then, of his own striking fault in this respect, and equally aware that he had not the faculty of amending it, he sagaciously or artfully had recourse to a stratagem in order to avoid the necessity of speaking at all.

While I was pondering upon this new instance of the strange construction of the poor fellow's mind, I gradually became aware that he was conducting me into a neighbourhood the aspect of which filled me with terror. We were now threading our way along a narrow street all the revolting phases of which were revealed by the light glimmering from the windows. Indeed, both right and left, all the windows showed that lights were burning within—a sure indication of the crowded state of the dwellings in that quarter. A glance hastily thrown through the windows of the ground floors, showed that the rooms were thronged to suffocation; and the atmosphere even out of doors was as fetid and sickly as if with the combined breaths of ten thousand fevered invalids. The gutter, running down the middle of the lane, looked like a little channel of ink with oil poured on the top of it; and close by the door of almost every dwelling was there an accumulated mass of filth and garbage. On either side of the way opened narrow and dark courts or passages, the entrances to which seemed almost choked with heaps of offal, decomposing vegetables, and feculence of every description. A more minute survey of the

lane itself showed that the houses were in the most wretched and dilapidated condition. As if by some strange attraction, opposite buildings seemed to grow nearer to each other at the top like two sympathetic trees in a garden; and to look upward, one side of the street appeared to be nodding forward towards the other, as if to shut out the little air which was permitted to penetrate into the lane at all. The state of the windows indicated the vilest neglect on the part of landlords and the utmost wretchedness on that of tenants; there were more broken panes than whole ones—more gaps stopped up with brown paper, wisps of straw, or bundles of old rotten rags thrust through, than there were squares of glass. Most of the street-doors were standing open: indeed many seemed as if it were no use to shut them, as they were falling from their hinges.

The sounds of drunken revelry, brawling, and debauchery issued forth from those loathsome habitations, in which human masses appeared to be pent up,—huddling close together—crowding, agitating, squeezing, and jostling in redundant numbers, like countless reptiles in a morass. Looking through the windows, the inmates of those dens might be seen with their countenances bearing the stamp of vice, demoralization, debauchery, and crime,—there being something frightful even in the shadows which their forms threw upon the blackened walls. At some of the doors ill-looking men were seated on the steps, smoking and talking to women whose faces, either bloated and red, or ghastly and emaciated, denoted the different stages and varieties of debauchery. I shuddered—shuddered to the innermost confines of my being: for, young and inexperienced as I was, especially in the contemplation of a scene which presented so frightful a novelty to my view, yet did the population of this vile alley strike me as possessing every attribute that was thievish and depraved.

But the street which I am describing—if indeed, even by the utmost stretch of courtesy, it deserves the name of *street* at all—was but one of a maze of similar thoroughfares through which my companion was guiding me. For the farther we advanced, the more hideous and horrible grew the features of the place. It seemed like plunging deeper and deeper into a frightful morass, where all the loathsome objects of reptile-life were brought out into relief by the noxious gases of its own feculence. I now felt that I was beholding for the first time the dark side of London; and heaven knows that whatever my pre-conceived ideas may have been relative to the poor neighbourhoods of the metropolis, they fell immensely short of the appalling reality. At every step I took, it appeared as if I were advancing into a cesspool of wretchedness, misery, and vice, whence there could be no self-extrication: I almost feared that I was sinking into a gulf of infamy, whence it were impossible to emerge again. I had seen at the West End all the brilliant portion of London's inhabitants—I was now threading my way through the quarters of its refuse population. Having passed from amidst the palatial mansions of Grosvenor Square to this sink of misery and depravity, it seemed like being suddenly transported from one world to another. I was amazed—I was horror-stricken—I was aghast, at the thought that the centre of light was so closely bordered upon by the centre of darkness!

But since that night I have learnt what I little thought and should have scarcely believed at the time—that it is not only the profligate, the debauched, and the depraved that swarm together in such neighbourhoods—not merely trampers, beggars, thieves, bad women, and the vilest of every class and of both sexes—but that dire necessity compels even honest industry to take up its dwelling there, and the iron hand of poverty forces mechanics and artizans, with their wives and their children, too frequently to seek lodgings and huddle together in a wretched room in the very midst of those sinks of iniquity to which all the moral corruption of London flows. Yes—and I have heard of poor servants too, who have been forced by grinding misery to betake themselves to those neighbourhoods, which are naught but beds of pestilence whence the physical plague and fever are propagated as well as every species of moral disease, and thence borne heaven alone knows how far and how wide!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRAMPERS' ARMS.

My mind was so deeply impressed with the horrors of the neighbourhood through which I was proceeding, that for some space I forgot everything regarding my present position—the part I was enacting—the business I had in hand—and the disguise which I wore. But on passing in front of the windows of a public-house, I was startled cruelly from my deep painful reverie, and recalled with a fearful wakefulness to myself, by a loud coarse brutal laugh which a group of loungers sent forth as I and Tommy hurried by them. Something was said about "the nigger man and his black lass;" but I was so frightened that I did not catch the exact words. Such an effect, however, did this incident produce upon me, that I stopped short—staggered—and would have fallen had not Mad Tommy caught me by the hand and thus made me aware of the necessity of conquering my emotions. On we sped together, pursued by the coarse and brutal laughter of the half-drunken loungers at the ale-house door;—and plunging into an alley, darker and more sinister-looking than any I had yet threaded, we did not slacken our pace till that rude uproarious mirth which had been excited at our expense, ceased to reach our ears.

"Miss Price," said Tommy, in a low whisper, "do—do, pray, mind what you are about. If afraid, go no farther—go no farther. Tommy go alone—he manage by himself—most likely, most likely."

"No, my good friend," I said, throwing as much firmness and decision as possible into my voice; "I am resolved to prosecute the enterprise to the last. I must admit that my courage failed me for a moment; but I will display no more of that weakness. Indeed, I do full well appreciate the necessity for a boundless courage and the fullest presence of mind, especially as I have got to speak for us both."

"Yes, yes—that's it," whispered Tommy, in a tone of satisfaction, as if he were rejoiced to perceive that I thus fully understood the relative positions we were to assume: "mind and recollect—Tommy not to speak—you do all the speaking. We poor niggers—just landed from ship—

come from West Indies. But Miss Price know what tale to tell—have her wits about her."

"Don't be afraid, Tommy," said I: "you may depend upon me. But are we near the place?"

"Hush!" whispered my companion; and in less than a minute he stopped opposite a public-house which had lights in all the lower and first-floor windows; but so dingy or indeed blackened were these windows themselves, that only a dull glimmering could penetrate through into the street. Facing this public-house there was a high dead wall; and altogether the place where we now halted was as dispiriting, as murderous-looking, and as cut-throat a quarter as can well be conceived.

The door stood half open, and showed a sort of bar within, round about which several ill-looking persons were lounging; and the fumes of tobacco rolled forth, poisoning the atmosphere as with a plague mist.

Having paused for a few moments, as if to afford me breathing-time to summon all my fortitude to my aid, Tommy made a sign that we should enter. But as he was now to play the part of a deaf and dumb brother, and therefore to be as it were dependent upon my guidance, I went in first—he closely following.

"Well, you niggers!" vociferated a great stout man who was serving liquor within the bar, and who had a greasy fur cap on his head: "what the deuce has brought you to show the light of your precious countenances at the *Trampers' Arms?* But if so be you've got money, you're just as welcome as ever a white 'un."

"I say, Bill," cried one lounger to another, "ain't this a spicy set out? Come, Miss Ebony, are you going to stand treat for a pot of beer? If so be you do, I'll take your part against no matter who; and I'll be bound no von'll say black's the white of your eye if I'm your friend."

The speaker was an immense, tall, herculean-built man, and seemed quite formidable enough to be justified in putting forward the vaunt to which he had just given utterance. I instantaneously saw the advantage of securing so potent a championship; and placing a shilling upon the bar said, "I will treat you with all my heart."

"Ah! so the woman's the pay-master—eh?" exclaimed the landlord inside the bar, with a coarse laugh, as he furnished the liquor. "Well, we can't say that the grey mare's the better hoss, cos they're both as black as black can be. Is he your husband or your brother, young woman—or neither von nor t'other?"

"My brother," I answered. "He is deaf and dumb, poor fellow—and therefore so entirely dependent upon me——"

"Well," interrupted the great tall man who had proffered his friendship on condition of being treated, and whom I presently found to be familiarly denominated Long Joe; "here's your health, Miss Timbuctoo—for that's a better name than Ebony: and here's wishing you luck:"—then having taken a long draught and handed the quart measure to his companions who stood near, he said, "It's just midnight and supper will be ready in a minute: you'll stay, won't you, Miss Timbuctoo?"

"Yes," I answered: "to be sure I will. Are there to be many present?"

"Thirty or forty, or so. But there go the dishes!" he exclaimed, as two or three greasy-looking waiters with dirty aprons emerged from some lower region and began to ascend the staircase with dishes in their hands—the said dishes sending forth a powerful, and indeed *too* savoury odour of fat and cabbages.

Tommy and I now accompanied Long Joe and his friends who had been lounging at the bar, upstairs into a spacious room, where two long parallel tables were spread for the supper. Dirty cloths—the commonest and roughest knives and forks—vinegar in ginger-beer bottles—mustard in broken tea-cups—salt in saucers—and pepper in tin boxes like flour-dredgers, formed the decorations of the board. There were no chairs save at the top and bottom, but uncouth deal forms without any backs. The apartment itself was of the dirtiest and most cheerless description: the walls and ceiling were black with soot and smoke—the windows were so begrimed that they were as dingy as if formed of ground glass—and the tables were lighted by common tallow candles stuck in blacking bottles and stationed at long intervals.

Such was the banquetting-room. But for the company! How can I possibly describe it?—and had it not been for the earnest anxiety I felt to recover the innocent babe from the hands of ruthless strangers and restore it to the arms of its mother—that mother who had been so kind to me—I should have fled in horror and loathing from the dreadful assemblage. Men, whose countenances reflected every possible variety of the worst passions—women, whose appearance bespoke a depravity that made one shudder, were scattered about to the number of perhaps forty. The entrance of myself and Tommy did not create the excitement which I had dreaded: for it seemed as if the company assembled there were accustomed to see all kinds of strange characters; and moreover it was very evident that Long Joe did exercise no small amount of influence over the motley gathering, and no one chose to insult any person whom he honoured with his protection. Thus, when a few persons had gathered round us and exchanged a remark or two with me, the ordeal of an introduction to that place was happily over.

The reader may be assured that at the very first moment when I put my foot into that room, my looks had been rapidly swept around in shuddering search of the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge—yes, and also with the dire apprehension of beholding my unfortunate brother Robert in their company. But I experienced a momentary relief on satisfying myself that not one of the three whom my eyes thus sought, was present. Then I looked amongst the women to see if there were any gipsies present—or any females at all answering the description which Jemima had given of the two who had stolen the babe: but again were my researches fruitless. I then began to wonder how on earth Tommy meant to proceed to recover the child—whether the child was within those walls—if so, how he would ascertain the fact—and having ascertained it, how he hoped to be able to carry off the babe from a place infested with desperadoes of such a stamp as those that met the eye on every side. But I was suddenly aroused from my reverie by the exclamation of "Here's the Bulldog!" which was uttered by Long Joe.

I started—and if I had not been plastered over with the black dye, should have seemed deadly pale; for I felt as if all the blood was rushing away from my countenance and gathering at my heart. At that moment Tommy touched me in a manner that was really significant enough to my comprehension, but could not have attracted anything like suspicious attention on the part of others. I knew that he meant me to summon all my courage to my aid; and being thus reminded of the necessity of so doing, I exerted the utmost moral power to follow the hint which though so tacitly was nevertheless so eloquently given.

Glancing towards the door I beheld Sawbridge and the Bulldog making their appearance: but my brother was not in their company.

"Holloa! who have we here?" shouted the Bulldog, in his coarse ruffian voice: and, accompanied by Sawbridge, he at once advanced towards the spot where I and Tommy were standing in company with Long Joe. "The King and Queen of the Cannibal Islands!" he vociferated—and his remark was followed by a loud laugh, in which all the guests joined.

"You must expect a little bantering," said Long Joe to me; "because you're new among us—but the Bulldog means no harm. I say, old feller," he continued, addressing himself direct to that dreadful character, "this is Miss Timbuctoo, and she's under my protection, for the night at least. As for her brother here, poor wretch, he's deaf and dumb, and so to be pitied."

"She's got pretty good features for a nigger gal," exclaimed the Bulldog: "but her hair," he added, fixing his eyes on the false front, "shows her origin. Well, I wish you joy, Joe, of your new acquaintances. But I say, where are the gipsies?" he demanded, suddenly lowering his voice.

"Oh! you know very well," answered Long Joe, "that they won't come down stairs and eat at the

same table with all us here. They have their own habits, and are as particular as possible."

"Well, they can do as they like about that," observed the Bulldog. "I suppose they're safe enough up-stairs, along with the brat?" he added, lowering his voice still more and speaking in a confidential manner to Long Joe, so as not to be overheard by those around—though he evidently did not care about speaking in my hearing; and I felt inwardly rejoiced at this proof that he was very far from entertaining the slightest suspicion with regard to me or Tommy.

"The old dame and her daughter the Gipsy Queen, as she calls her, are both up-stairs," replied Long Joe, in answer to the Bulldog's question; "and the kid is with 'em safe and sound. I told you I would keep watch here, to see that those swarthy ladies didn't play any tricks and negotiate a compromise on their own account."

"Well, it was you who recommended them to us to do the job," observed the Bulldog; "and so of course you was answerable for them—besides being interested in the reward we hope to reap."

"To be sure," remarked Long Joe. "And what's stirring up at the West End?"

"Oh! it's all alive," returned the Bulldog: "and the excitement's glorious. Me and Nick here have been lurking about in the ale-shops and heard all the news. Bills is issued offering a reward of five hundred guineas for the immediate restoration of the child——"

"The deuce!" ejaculated Long Joe. "Don't you think it would be better to close at once?"

"Not a bit of it!" rejoined the Bulldog. "Don't be in a hurry. To-morrow a thousand will be offered—and then we will just drop a note into the post to say that the child will never be forthcoming till two thousand guineas is offered for her, with a promise of pardon to every body concerned in the business."

"Why, all this may take perhaps a week or ten days to negotiate!" observed Long Joe, in a tone of discontent.

"Well, no matter," said the Bulldog; "if so be we make a good thing by it at last. Me and Sawbridge didn't come up to London to work at trifles: we have been tinkering about too long with them down at Ashford—and as it was us who thought of this job, planned it all, arranged it, and let you into it, you must let us have our own way in managing it."

"Well, but you don't think for a minute," resumed Long Joe, "that them gipsy women will stay locked up in-doors for the next week or ten days? The fact is, they're deuced discontented at being kept in at all. They thought they was to have their five guineas apiece as soon as they had brought the child up here, and then be able to get back to Norwood again."

"Well," exclaimed the Bulldog, with a sort of subdued growl and with a savage ferocity of look; "if so be we had anybody we could trust to look after the baby for a short time, the two gipsies might tramp off at once—'cause why, me and Nick here have got ready cash enough to tip 'em the ten guineas."

"Here, I say," interrupted Long Joe: and taking the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge aside, he conversed with them for a few minutes in low whispers: but as they all three kept their eyes fixed upon me, I felt assured that I was the object of their conversation. I was not however afraid—I had no misgiving: on the contrary, I felt certain that I could even anticipate what was to come.

Indeed, as the reader may suppose, I had drunk in with an absorbing interest every syllable of the conversation above detailed. But all the while I affected to be utterly indifferent to what was passing near me, and even pretended to make signs with my fingers to Tommy, as if talking to him by means of the dumb alphabet. In a word, at that critical juncture I was armed with all the requisite presence of mind and fortitude for the part which I had to perform.

When the whispered discourse of the Bulldog, Nick Sawbridge, and Long Joe was concluded, they accosted me; and the last-mentioned individual said, "We have been talking about you, Miss Timbuctoo."

"About me?" I said, affecting a careless air.

"Come, tell us whether you have got anything particlar to do—who you are—how long you've been in London—and all about it. But don't be afeard," immediately added Long Joe: "we don't want to know for any bad purpose. So, if you've run away from some master or missus who brought you over to England—which is what we werry much suspect—you've nothing to be afeard of on our account."

"But why do you ask?" said I, allowing him by my manner to fancy that he *had* hit upon the precise truth.

"Because, if so be you want a job for a few days to put a little money into your pocket——"

"Ah! if I only thought you were serious, I should joyfully accept it," said I: "for I have got my poor brother dependent on me——"

"Well then, me and my friends here," continued Long Joe, "will be *your* friends. Did you happen to hear me and this genelman,"—and he glanced towards the Bulldog—"talking about a babby just now?"

"I did hear you say something about it," I answered: "but——"

"No matter the *buts*. I dare say you didn't pay no attention, as the business didn't regard you. But come, will you take charge of that there babby for a week or ten days?"

"Where? I have no home," I answered.

"Why, here—up-stairs—and you shall have a deuced nice room for yourself and brother, and plenty of good things to eat and drink—only you will have to be locked in all the time, cos why, it's werry particular that the poor little babby shouldn't go out to stand a chance of getting cold, and the measles is werry much about."

I pretended to consider for a few moments, during which interval I observed that the Bulldog and Sawbridge were regarding me with an attention that began to stir up misgivings in my mind; for although I had, as a matter of course, altered my tone of voice as much as possible, and assumed as hardy a manner as it was in my nature to affect—moreover, deep as my disguise was—yet I trembled inwardly lest those miscreants should penetrate the stratagem. I therefore hastened to declare that I accepted the proposition; and I now experienced the supreme satisfaction and the ineffable relief of seeing them both avert

their eyes again in a manner which showed that they had not really been regarding me with any degree of suspicion.

"Then come along with us," said the Bulldog: and he was moving towards the door when some one shouted out that supper was served up.

Glancing at the tables, I perceived they were covered with huge joints of various descriptions, and immense dishes of vegetables, all sending up a steam that was overpowering in its odour.

"Miss Timbuctoo wants to have supper first," said Long Joe, clutching the Bulldog by the arm.

"Not I indeed," I hastened to observe, "if it will interfere with any of your arrangements."

"Can't she and her nigger brother have their supper sent up to 'em?" asked the Bulldog, in a growling tone.

"Certainly—with pleasure," said I: and beckoning Tommy to follow me, as if he were totally dependent on my signs for his proceedings, I hastened after the Bulldog, Sawbridge, and Long Joe as they quitted the room.

And here I should observe that from the first moment we set foot across the threshold of the *Trampers' Arms*, Tommy had played his part in a manner which excited my astonishment. He had in every respect *looked* the deaf and dumb being—appearing to hang upon me for the slightest sign to regulate his movements, just as he would really have done if we had been playing natural instead of artificial parts and he was in reality my deaf and dumb brother.

The Bulldog led the way to a bedroom a storey higher up; and there I beheld two gipsies answering the description which Jemima had given of them. The old hag was dozing in a chair; while her tall handsome daughter, whose remarkable beauty had by no means been exaggerated by Jemima, was walking to and fro, getting the baby off to sleep. Ah! what an emotion of joy suddenly thrilled in my bosom as I beheld that sweet infant safe and sound—and, at least at that moment, utterly unconscious of any change in its condition!

"Hah! what means this?" demanded the Gipsy Queen, as her looks, after glancing towards the Bulldog, Sawbridge, and Long Joe, immediately fell upon Tommy and me: and I almost shrank at the moment beneath those dark eyes from whose lustrous depths the arrows of suspicion seemed to flash forth.

"Oh! it's all right," said the Bulldog.

"Who are these?" now demanded the old harridan, starting up from her chair.

"Never do you mind," returned the Bulldog. "We're going to dismiss you now—that is to say, if you like to go—'cause why, we don't want to do the thing what's unhandsome——"

"Have you our money ready?" asked the old Norwood gipsy, in an impatient tone.

"Aye, to be sure—or else it isn't likely we should take it into our heads to bundle you off——"

"Talk not in this familiar and insolent way to *us*," exclaimed the Gipsy Queen, drawing up her fine form to the full of its stately height, and having for the moment something really grand and majestic in her appearance. "Although for the sake of the yellow gold we have become your tools in this transaction"—and she glanced down at the sleeping child in her arms—"we will not be treated with disrespect. But if our reward is at hand, let it be forthcoming at once, and we shall gladly take our departure. Mother, you will go to-night, will you not?"

"Aye, to be sure will I. I like not this London air, and shall only breathe freely when again at Norwood," answered the old gipsy.

"Well, here's the money," said the Bulldog, in a sullen humour at the rebuke he had received from the stately Gipsy Queen: and he counted down ten guineas upon the table.

The old harridan now took her red cloak off the bed, but put it on inside out, so that it appeared of some dark and inobtrusive colour: while the Gipsy Queen, instead of covering her head with the gay silk handkerchief which she wore in Jemima's presence, put on an old straw bonnet. She then threw a common shawl over her shoulders; and both she and her mother were now ready to depart. Dressed as at this moment I beheld them, it was no wonder if on quitting Jemima in the morning they had effected those prompt changes in their apparel which enabled them to go forth from the park without attracting the slightest notice from the keepers. The red cloak was easily turned inside out—the straw bonnet and old shawl might have been at hand behind an adjacent tree—and thus had the principal characteristics of the two women's garb been at once eschewed so soon as the theft of the child from poor Jemima's arms was accomplished."

To continue. The old Norwood Gipsy and her stately daughter took their departure: but even ere they had gone the infant was already in my arms. My heart throbbed with indescribable joy: for I felt as if the victory was already achieved—the triumph won!

"Now, then, we shall send you up your supper," said the Bulldog; "and whatever you want you must ask for and you'll have. So now good night."

"Good night, Miss Timbuctoo," added Long Joe.

"Good night," I answered: and the next moment, as the door closed behind the three retreating ruffians, I and Tommy were left alone together, with the innocent object of this venturous enterprise of ours.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RESULT OF THE STRATAGEM.

NEVER shall I forget the expression of joy which suddenly lighted up on Tommy's countenance the instant we were thus alone together. It was positively ludicrous when appearing on features dyed jet black; and I do believe that he would actually have begun to dance about the room, had I not made him a gesture imploring him to moderate, or rather subdue, any actual outburst of exultation, for fear of being overheard or watched. I myself experienced a perfect enthusiasm of delight; and I could hardly believe that circumstances had combined so admirably, and in so short a time, to crown our enterprize with success. The present position of affairs actually seemed too favourable to last. I would not however allow any misgiving

to damp my spirits, but rather to serve as an inducement for the most prompt and ready action which might appear best in order to consummate the achievement. In a word, it became requisite to think how we were to escape from the house, bearing the child with us.

In a few minutes a female servant belonging to the tavern, made her appearance with a tray containing two plates of meat, vegetables, bread, a pot of beer, and a small bottle of spirits,—this last-mentioned article plainly proving that the men who had thus sent up the provender judged of Tommy's and my taste by their own. The woman, having intimated that if I required anything I was to ring the bell, quitted the room, locking the door behind her.

I experienced not the least inclination for food; and indeed if I had been ever so hungry, I could not have touched the great thick slices of underdone beef that were swimming in fat gravy. But it was otherwise with poor Tommy; and finding that I was resolved not to touch a mouthful, he demolished the contents of both plates. He however partook moderately of the beer, and left the spirits altogether untouched.

While he was disposing of the victuals I sat deliberating upon what course it would now be best to pursue; and at length I hit upon a scheme which I thought calculated to answer the purpose. Accordingly, when Tommy had finished his supper I conveyed my plan to his ear, but speaking in the lowest possible whisper for precaution's sake. I represented to him that if we could manage to obtain a separate room for him, it was probable enough that the Bulldog and his accomplices,—believing him to be really deaf and dumb, and therefore regarding him as a poor harmless being, incapable of mischief, much more of treachery—would not adopt any precaution in making him a prisoner. In this case, I went on to say, Tommy might watch his opportunity when the house grew quiet, to issue forth from his own room—steal to my door—liberate me—and thus enable us to quit the place together. Or he might escape by himself, and go and fetch some constables to come and search the house with a view to my liberation.

But the moment I mentioned this latter alternative, Tommy shook his head with much vehemence, and then whispered, "No, no: Tommy never play traitor like that! Bulldog and others bad men—very bad men; but they have given Tommy food, and Tommy won't hurt them—not likely, not likely."

"But all the rest of the plan you approve of?" said I, in the most conciliatory manner.

"Yes, yes—all very good—capital!" he answered. "Nothing better—nothing better. The men and women down stairs will all drink till very late: then they go away—house shut up. That's our time."

Perceiving that my companion fully entered into the spirit of the scheme which I had chalked out, apart from the betrayal of those to whom the poor fellow considered, in spite of his knowledge of their wickedness, that he lay under some little obligation,—I rang the bell; and in a few minutes the woman-servant re-appeared,—Tommy having in the mean time settled himself down again into the demeanour of a poor deaf and dumb creature, taking scarcely any notice of external objects.

"I wish to know," said I, "whether my brother here can have a room to himself. We have not been accustomed to occupy the same chamber——"

"Well, I don't know for the matter of that," interrupted the woman coarsely: "for niggers, you are precious particular! There's no white people frequents this house that ever was so nice and delicate as all that."

"My good woman," said I, "try and manage this for me:"—and I put a shilling into her hand. "I dare say you know that I am likely to stay here for the next week or ten days, to take care of this child; and I am to be paid well for my services. I shall not forget you in any little kindness you may show me."

The coin and this assurance produced an immediate effect upon the woman; and she said, "Well, I'll do my best. Some folks is particular I know; and perhaps nigger people is more so than whites. Wait a minute: I'll go and see what master says."

She accordingly quitted the room, again locking the door behind her; and after an absence of about ten minutes, she returned, saying, "Well, I've managed it for you—that is, if so be your brother don't mind sleeping in the same room with three or four other genelmen as uses the house."

I stated that my brother would have no objection; and I then pretended to talk to Tommy by means of the fingers. The cunning he displayed in affecting to follow all my signs with his looks, was truly admirable; and when I thought it fit to make an end of this dumb show, he rose and made a sign to the woman that he was ready to follow her. She accordingly conducted him away, not forgetting to lock the door behind her.

I was now alone—left to the companionship of my own thoughts. I kissed the dear child who was sleeping so tranquilly in my arms, saying to myself, "What terrible risks, little one, am I incurring this night for your sake!" But I felt not the slightest regret at having embarked in the venture. On the contrary, I experienced a sort of pride in reflecting how much I had done on behalf of the poor innocent. Then I fell into a train of meditation relative to all the various phases of the last few hours' proceedings. I saw plainly enough that the reason why Tommy would not in the first instance give such information as would have enabled the authorities of justice to make a descent upon the *Trampers' Arms* and thus recover the child at once, was because he did not choose to be the means of handing over the Bulldog and his accomplices to the grasp of the law. He did not mind defeating their ends; but he would not betray them into the hands of justice.

Therefore was it that he had adopted this circuitous and underhand method of accomplishing his purpose. It was likewise clear that he had been initiated by the Bulldog and his confederates into many of the mysteries of low life in London, and that he on this occasion availed himself of that knowledge to carry out his ends—thus making use as it were of the weapons which they had placed in his hands. In this manner was it that he had rendered the services of Mr. and Mrs. Byles available in the matter of the disguises; and it must be confessed that those persons were proficients in the art of personal transformation. But what most of all engaged my thoughts

and excited my mingled wonder and admiration, was the remarkable astuteness, sharpness, and sagacity which Tommy had shown throughout the whole night's proceedings—so fully confirming the oft-proclaimed fact that there is no kind of idiotcy without its under-current of keen-witted shrewdness, and no species of madness without a method.

But in addition to all these topics for meditation, the reader may be well assured that I did not forget those who were so dear to me, and who were so far away—my brother William and my two sisters. I thought also of Robert,—wondering what he was doing, and whether he was still in the hands of those desperadoes of whose capacity for daring wickedness and consummate iniquity the very circumstance which had led me into the present adventure was a signal proof. These reflections brought a shade of sadness upon my mind; and gloomy misgivings crept into my soul. Triumphant as the success of Tommy and myself had up till this moment been, there was still time for it to be succeeded by exposure and discovery —turn into failure—and involve us both in destruction. For I felt assured that if we were detected, we should never be allowed to quit this dreadful place alive!

While I was in the midst of these saddening thoughts, Isabella Clementina woke up and at once began giving vent to the most frightful screams. I thought the poor child would go into convulsions and expire horribly: for strange to say, it had not struck me that my black face would be but too well calculated to fill the little innocent with affright. I concealed the candle under the fire-place, and shaded it with a chair in such a manner as to darken the room: then I walked up and down, talking to the child in the fondest terms possible and doing all I could to tranquillise it. The babe presently recognised my voice, and gradually grew calmer, until at length she sobbed herself off to sleep again. Then I placed her upon the bed, and was about to sit down, when it struck me that I would examine the premises upon which the window looked. Gently lifting the dingy blind, which was drawn down, I was enabled to perceive that the room looked upon a yard at the back of the house; and the howling of a great dog, issuing from below, now met my ears. I therefore saw that, even in case of the very worst, there would be no possibility of escape in that direction; and I returned to my seat, dispirited, nervous, and full of misgivings.

The uproarious sounds of revelry from the banquetting-room below, now reached me audibly enough; and I began to wonder how long the orgie would last, and at what hour the house was likely to be quiet. For a moment I even dreaded lest some of the revellers might sit up all night: but then I recollected the confident manner in which Tommy had stated that the place *would* grow quiet, though at a late hour; and satisfied that he was well acquainted with the habits of those frequenting the infamous den, I grew reassured on that head. In proportion as I was thus enabled to reason myself into better spirits and a more hopeful mood, did a sense of weariness and fatigue creep over me: that is to say, as the nervous excitement of my mind subsided, nature was enabled to assert its demand for a much-needed interval of rest. A sort of dreamy repose gradually and insidiously stole over me; and though it could not be said that I actually slept soundly, yet did I lose the consciousness of where I was and the circumstances in which I was placed.

How long I thus remained in drowsy listlessness, I knew not: but with a sudden start did I wake up to a complete knowledge of everything relative to my position—and I felt myself shuddering from head to foot with a cold sensation of terror. There was a great noise in the house; and for the first few moments I knew not what it was. Indeed, there can be no doubt it was this disturbance which had aroused me so abruptly and filled me with such alarm. But my terrors speedily subsided and I experienced an indescribable sense of relief, on discovering that it was the party below breaking up and dispersing. I now became aware, too, that the candle had gone out, and that the light which shone faintly in the room was that of morning. I lifted the blind, and perceived that it was the twilight preceding the dawn; and while I was thus peeping forth upon the blackened walls and house-tops of the buildings behind, a church-clock at no great distance struck three. I had thus dozed about two hours.

Turning away from the window, I went and listened at the door. The revellers were rushing down the stairs, singing, bawling, imitating the crowing of cocks, quarrelling, and shouting vociferously—the voices of women mingling with those of men in horrible discordance. Some heavy steps were ascending the stairs; and as they passed by the door of my room, I heard the Bulldog's brutal laugh following some jest to which he had just given utterance. Indeed, I did not breathe freely till that dreadful laugh no longer sounded on my ears, but suddenly ceased as a door in the same passage closed with some degree of violence.

I felt assured that the Bulldog and his immediate accomplices slept in the house: and then it struck me that it was perhaps in *their* room Tommy had been located! A thousand terrors now sprang up at once in my imagination: thought became absolute horror. What if his disguise should be detected? what if he should have gone to sleep? Oh! my brain felt as if barbed arrows of fire were piercing it through and through: and staggering back to my seat, I sank upon the chair a prey to anguish as lancinating as that which I experienced when overhanging the edge of Shakspeare's Cliff.

Presently the house became altogether quiet—this deep silence which now prevailed affording a strange contrast with the terrific uproar that had so recently heralded it. Now did I begin to regain courage once more; and I thought that an hour could not pass away without deciding my fate. The child continued to sleep soundly. Poor innocent! how unconscious was she of the whole proceeding of mingled peril, doubt, and horror, of which it had been the cause!

Nothing could equal the acute suspense which I now experienced. Everything depended upon Mad Tommy—depending therefore upon a poor half-witted being. Half-witted indeed! Yes—but what astuteness had he not shown? and was it likely that he would suffer himself to be discomfited *now*? Thus did I endeavour to reason myself into a hopeful frame of mind once more: but the

task was not so easy. One terrible idea was dominant in my mind—namely, that as the Bulldog and his accomplices evidently lodged in the house, they would be ready at hand in case of detection to wreak a deadly vengeance upon poor Tommy and me.

Thus did an hour pass—an hour of varied emotions, as terrible as varied! Meanwhile the sun had risen, and it was now broad day-light. I felt nervous to a degree—ill and miserable. The black dye seemed like a coat of thick concrete mud upon my skin; and in one of those eccentric moments to which the mind under circumstances of imminent peril and transcending horror is liable, I felt as if the greatest happiness next to escaping safe and sound from that house, would be the luxury of soap and hot water!

An hour had elapsed, I say—and the church-clock struck four. Almost immediately afterwards I heard the key turning in the lock of the door. Heavens, how my heart beat!—it was as if a sledge-hammer were striking continuous blows against my side. The door opened—and Tommy, with his finger upon his lip, stole into the room. A reprieve suddenly proclaimed to the condemned wretch when standing upon the drop, could not bring greater relief than that which I now experienced all in a moment.

"Come, come—not an instant to lose," said Tommy, in a hasty whisper, as he held the door still ajar in his hand.

I was so bewildered with an ineffable sensation of joy, that having put on my bonnet and rag of a shawl, I snatched up the child somewhat hastily from the bed; and she gave a low cry. I strained her to my breast in a soothing manner, while Tommy closed the door completely; and the quick glance which I threw upon him showed me that he was actually writhing with the agony of suspense. Fortunately the babe's wail was hushed: but I remained standing motionless with her for nearly five minutes in my arms, to make sure that she had indeed relapsed into slumber. These five minutes were a perfect age!

"Now," said Tommy at length: and as I gave an affirmative nod, he opened the door.

We then crept stealthily forth together, and began descending the staircase, which was quite light, there being a window in the wall. But the steps creaked beneath our feet; and at every downward pace we took we paused to listen in the profoundest suspense. All continued quiet—and we reached the landing of the first floor. The large room was open, and unmistakable signs of the night's orgie met the hasty glance which we threw in to assure ourselves that no one was there. Chairs and tables were upset, and the floor was strown with bottles, pewter measures, tobacco-pipes, and pieces of candle.

Quickly turning away from the revolting scene, I followed my companion down the last flight of stairs. But at this instant Miss Isabella suddenly opened her fine large eyes; and as she caught sight of my black face, her little features at once began to wreathe themselves into the dimples which immediately prelude an infant's crying.

"Hush, hush, dear Bella!" I said, in a soothing whisper: but it was of no avail—for the child sent forth its shrill penetrating cry, which was immediately followed by a fit of screaming and shrieking.

A mortal terror seized upon me, and I felt as if I were becoming frenzied. But Tommy, without losing his presence of mind, rushed to the street-door.

"Halloa! what's that?" thundered the voice of the Bulldog from above: and then I heard as distinctly as possible a rush of bare feet, but with steps as heavy as they were rapid, on the second storey. "Nick—Joe—treachery—they're gone!" vociferated that dreadful voice: and the next moment the Bulldog and his companions were precipitating themselves down the stairs at a furious rate.

In the mean time Tommy had unfastened the chain which secured the front door—had drawn back the bolts—and had unlocked it.

"Come, come—for God's sake come!" he exclaimed, with an agonising lucidity of tone and manner, as he threw open the door.

All in a moment was I inspired with the courage of desperation, as the sudden view of the street without seemed to promise freedom and safety. I darted towards the door and bounded over the threshold, the terrible imprecations of the Bulldog and his confederates reaching my ears as they precipitated themselves down the last flight. But Tommy, having taken the key out of the lock on the inner side of the door, had thrust it in again on the outside; so that scarcely had I thus shot forth as it were into the street, when quick as the eye can wink Tommy dashed after me, drawing the door behind him and locking it fast.

"Now away for our lives!" he said, as he sped along the alley; and at the same time he hurled the key over the dead wall facing the house whence we had just escaped so providentially.

Forward we ran, and in less than a minute gained the end of the lane. We glanced back, but saw no one in pursuit: for even supposing that the ruffians whom we had thus outwitted, either burst open the front door, or thought of leaping through the ground-floor windows, they nevertheless must have paused to put on some clothing, inasmuch as they had risen from their beds to rush down stairs in the manner already described.

"No one coming—we are all safe!" cried Tommy. "This way, this way!"—and he bounded onward, down another narrow dirty street, with me close following at his heels. Every moment did we look back to see if we were pursued: but not a living soul was to be seen in the street besides ourselves; and forward we sped through the same maze which we had threaded a few hours back, and which I have already described. Indeed, as I subsequently learnt, it was in the very heart of St. Giles's that the *Tramper's Arms* was situated; and at the time of which I am writing no quarter of London was more horrible, more filthy, or more fraught with dangers than that. But as I was then hurrying through the loathsome district, guided by Mad Tommy, and carrying the child in my arms, I had little leisure or inclination to scan the principal features of the labyrinth, so as to ascertain how far its aspect by day confirmed the impression made upon me by its appearance at night.

In about ten minutes Tommy suddenly stopped short at a large dingy-looking house in an alley where the other habitations were much smaller and of the most wretched description. Every window of the house where we thus halted, had shutters

fastened inside; and it at once struck me that this must be the Byles's establishment.

"Good heavens, Tommy!" said I, seizing him by the arm just as he was about to pull the door-bell: "you will not stop here? 'Tis the very place whither those men will pursue us!"

"No danger, no danger," returned Tommy, in a tone of mingled confidence and firmness. "Old Byles not let them in, but will take care of us. Miss Price will see that Tommy knows how to manage it all:"—and with these words he rang the bell.

In less than a minute I heard a door open inside; and then Mrs. Byles asked from within, "Who's there?"

"Tommy," was the answer given whisperingly through the keyhole.

Thereupon chain and bolts fell back—the door opened—and Mrs. Byles appeared in the passage, dressed precisely as I had seen her a few hours back, and looking as if she had not been in bed all night.

"Ah! so you are returned?" she said, as Tommy and I at once entered the house: for though I experienced no small hesitation to trust myself within those walls, I did not choose to rebel against the will of my companion, who had already done so much for me and done that much so well. "And you have got a little one with you, eh?" observed the woman, as she fixed her eyes upon the child who was now sleeping once more. "But I suppose you are in a hurry to get rid of this disguise and put on your own things again?"

While she was thus speaking, the door in the passage opened, and old Byles made his appearance with a dirty white cotton night cap on his head instead of the dingy silk skull-cap, and his lean lank form wrapped in an old faded chintz dressing-down which was ample enough for a Daniel Lambert.

"Ah! Tommy and the young lass," he said, a smile appearing upon his hideous countenance.

"Yes—here we are, safe and sound," Tommy hastened to observe; "and done what we wanted too! But all that no matter—not your business—our's—our's! You will not let anybody come—not open the door to a soul! Say nobody here!"

"Rest assured of that," said Mrs. Byles: then turning to me, she remarked, "If you are afraid of any thing, you need entertain no alarm on account of me or my husband. We never mix ourselves up in other people's affairs: we hear, see, and say nothing—and we don't allow any noise or disturbance to take place in our house. We buy goods when they are brought to us for sale; and we disguise people for masquerades or what not," added the woman in a significant manner; "but beyond that we do nothing. That's the way we keep ourselves out of trouble, and avoid coming to loggerheads with the officers of justice."

I was much cheered—indeed I may say that my misgivings were completely set at rest—by these assurances: for I had previously fancied that the Byleses were most likely in league with all such characters as the Bulldog, and would take their part or assist them in carrying out their aims. But I now saw that, in plain terms, they were merely "receivers of stolen goods," with which avocation they united that of supplying costumes and making up disguises, as the reader has already seen.

I now accompanied the woman up-stairs, to the bed-chamber where I had performed my singular toilet on the previous night, and where I hastened to discard it with all imaginable pleasure. It was with the most fervid joy that I washed off the odious dye which, as Mrs. Byles had assured me, soon yielded to hot water, soap, and soda; and in about half-an-hour I was myself again. Perhaps I shall be pardoned if I declare that never before nor since did I survey myself with so much satisfaction in the glass as I did when restored to my original complexion and again apparelled in my own vesture.

When my toilet was finished, I examined into the state of my finances, and found that they were reduced to three or four shillings. I wished to make Mrs. Byles a farther present for her attentions; but I did not like to offer her such a trifle as that; and I accordingly assured her that I would call or send in the course of the day and give her some additional recompense.

"Well, I thought you would," she said, with an evident greedy eagerness after money: "for I saw clear enough that you wasn't one of the sort that generally come here, and that it must be some novel kind of an adventure in which the like of you was engaged. That's what made me take the trouble to sit up for you, which I shouldn't do for or'nary folks."

I renewed my promise to make the woman a farther present; and she expressed herself satisfied that I would keep my word. I now again took charge of Isabella, who had been sleeping on the bed all the time I was changing my dress; and on descending to the passage, I found Tommy waiting for me. He was transformed back to precisely the same being in all particulars that he was previous to assuming the disguise; and when I remembered all he had done, as well as the excellence of heart which he had displayed throughout the adventure, it cut me to the quick to behold him once more clad in the vilest and most sordid rags, without shoes or stockings on his feet!

"Oh! why did you not keep the clothes?" I exclaimed: "and I would pay for them. Besides, you *must* come with me to receive the thanks——"

"Hush!" he said: "don't talk of that. I don't want any reward. Give me a shilling—and I shall walk back to Ashford. Tommy likes that place best."

"I will not move out of this house," said I, addressing him in a decisive voice, "till I see you properly dressed; and then you shall come with me, and I know that something good will be done for you. Indeed I am very much mistaken if you will ever be allowed to know what want and rags are again," I added, with tears in my eyes.

"Ah! Miss Price, you are kind—very, very kind," said the poor fellow, wiping away his own tears with the back of his hand: "but Tommy will have his way."

"But I declare that you shall not!" I said, more emphatically still. "I am sure you do not wish to distress me? and I shall be very unhappy unless you come with me."

"Tommy can't—would never dare enter great big house——"

"Yes," I exclaimed, a thought striking me: "but you must come to tell them that all I say is

true—or else I shall not be believed; and therefore, you see, it is quite necessary for you to bear me company to Grosvenor Square——"

"Hush! don't talk too much," cried Tommy. "Mustn't let all the world know what we have been doing. They *will* believe you," he added, with a look so full of meaning that for the instant he appeared in perfect possession of his intellects: then pointing to the child which I carried in my arms, he added, "Here is the proof of your story."

"But still you *must* come!" said I.

Tommy seemed to reflect profoundly for nearly a minute, during which interval Byles and his wife exchanged a few rapid whispers: for notwithstanding their prudential habit of avoiding any interference with the affairs of others, they had evidently been listening with no small degree of interest to the brief and rapid dialogue which had taken place between Tommy and myself. I also observed that they started slightly and threw upon each other significant looks when I mentioned the name of Grosvenor Square: and then was it that they began whispering together.

"Excuse me, Miss," at length said the old man, in his shivering, quaking, and trembling voice: "but I see you are very respectable—pray excuse me—but if you like, Tommy can have anything on credit here, and you can send me round the amount of the little bill in the course of the day."

"Yes—and if so be," chimed in Mrs. Byles, "you want a guinea or two to give him, Miss, you can have it, I'm sure, and welcome."

"I am much obliged to you," said I, "and I at once accept the offer relative to the clothes. Now, Tommy, make haste and go and dress yourself in the best suit you can find to fit you: and then you must come with me."

"Well, Tommy will take the clothes and one yellow money-piece—just *one*," he said; "but nothing more—nothing more: not likely, not

likely! And this is on condition, mind—you understand me?—that you don't make me go with you?"

"But you *must* come with me, I repeat," was my earnest and remonstrative exclamation. "You know that those with whom I live, will do everything for you—at least my dear lady will: and so you must come!"

"Then Tommy won't!" he answered, with a dogged manner and sullen look.

I saw at once that it would be useless to attempt to persuade him to go with me to Harlesdon House; and I therefore thought it better to make him accept whatever benefits I could at the moment confer upon him—trusting to a future and speedy opportunity of having more done for him through the medium of Lady Harlesdon. I accordingly consented to the compromise he proposed: and having disappeared with old Byles for about ten minutes, he came forth again, clad in a complete suit of new corduroy, with thick worsted stockings and lace-up boots.

"He wouldn't take any better," observed Byles, shaking his head despondingly at the loss of the profit which he would have reaped on a more expensive suit.

"No, no—not likely, not likely," said the poor fellow, evidently feeling as proud and as happy as possible in his new suit, rude and rough though it were. "Tommy knows what he looks best in—Tommy very smart now—dressed for Sundays!"—and as he laughed, it was with regret I saw that there was as idiotic a vacancy as ever in his manner.

"Well now, about the money?" said Mrs. Byles.

"Aye, aye—the money," echoed her husband, in his quivering tones: and with a hand equally tremulous he drew forth a dozen guineas from a pocket of his dressing-gown.

"If you will trust me with them all," said I, "let Tommy take them every one; and I pledge myself that you shall be paid within a few hours."

"All!" ejaculated the object of my remark. "No, no: Tommy not know what to do with them—not likely, not likely! Tommy take two; and that will keep him for so long——Oh, so long!"

To be brief, vainly did I urge upon the poor fellow to accept the whole of the money. No coaxing, nor argument, nor entreaty could overrule his fixed resolve; and I was accordingly forced to abandon the point, leaving him to take merely the two pieces of gold.

An hour had been spent in the manner now described at Byles's establishment—the child was getting very fretful and restless—and I longed to behold Grosvenor Square again. Therefore, having obtained the specific address of the house on a piece of paper, I took leave of its owners and sallied forth in company with Tommy. On emerging from the lane, a wider thoroughfare brought us into High Street, St. Giles,—just as the parish church was chiming half-past five. Tommy intimated his wish to see me as far as Grosvenor Square, and I joyfully accepted his escort—not so much through fear of the outwitted ruffians, there being now many persons abroad in the streets; but with the lingering hope of being enabled to induce him to be presented to my mistress as the individual who had been the means of recovering her child.

While proceeding homeward, Tommy gave me a few particulars in his own disjointed and scarcely intelligible manner, respecting one portion of the night's adventure which as yet presents a gap in the narrative. This was what happened to him when, separating from me at the *Tramper's Arms*, he was assigned to another room. It seems that the chamber to which he was thus shown by the female-servant had four beds in it; and without putting off a single article of apparel, he lay down on one, covering himself with the counterpane. Not for a moment did he go to sleep—but remained awake, vigilant and watchful. At last, at about three o'clock (as already described), the party in the supper-room broke up; and the Bulldog, Nick Sawbridge, and Long Joe repaired to the room where Tommy lay. He pretended to be asleep, although experiencing no inconsiderable dread of detection in respect to the disguise which he wore and who he really was. Fortunately, however, the three fellows did not attempt to molest him or play him any tricks; but having casually remarked "that it was the nigger chap who was there," they undressed themselves and went to bed. Sawbridge and Long Joe soon fell asleep; but Tommy fancied that the Bulldog was remaining awake for some time—and hence the delay of an hour ere he ventured to leave his own couch, steal from the room, and hasten to emancipate me. The rest is known to the reader; and thus, with those incidental explanations, the narrative of the night's adventures is rendered complete.

I asked Tommy what he thought was the reason that the Bulldog and his friends had not pursued us, and why they had not sought us at the Byles's house? The answers he gave me afforded another proof that the faculty of reasoning was not extinct, but merely warped and rendered eccentric as it were within him. He said, as well as I could understand him, that although we had carried off the child, it by no means followed that the ruffians should have guessed who we were,—indeed, that it was next to impossible, considering our disguises, that they could have suspected the real truth at all,—and consequently, suspecting nothing, there was naught to take them to the Byles's house. As for pursuing us, they might have instituted a search in the neighbourhood so soon as they had huddled on their clothes; but we had got too good a start of them to be overtaken.

Such was Tommy's reasoning upon the subject; and by the time he had finished we reached Grosvenor Square. Oh! how my heart leaped as I beheld the mansion into which I was about to carry such joy! The feeling was a reward, ten thousand times over, for everything I had gone through during the past night. But the full tide of my satisfaction was somewhat checked when, on renewing my entreaty for my companion to go with me to the house, he gave a resolute refusal. I besought and implored him to change his mind: but he would not. I then asked him to meet me again at a later hour in the day: but he declared his intention of at once setting off for Ashford. In a word, all I could say was of no avail; and after wringing my hand warmly, the poor fellow hurried away. I stood watching him till he turned

the corner of the street along which he sped; but he did not look back—and when he was out of sight I gave a profound sigh, thinking to myself how pleasant it would have been to see that unfortunate being placed in a condition to insure him against want through the grateful benevolence of Lady Harlesdon.

The church-clocks were striking six as I rang at the bell of Harlesdon House. One of the under-housemaids speedily answered the summons; and the moment she beheld me with the child in my arms, she gave a cry of mingled amazement and joy which seemed the harbinger of the still more fervid delight that was in a few minutes to be experienced within. Not waiting to ask me a single question, the housemaid rushed up-stairs as if she were wild, to carry the happy intelligence to her master and mistress. I ascended more slowly—for I was ready to drop with fatigue. Lady Harlesdon, having hastily thrown on a morning wrapper, came rushing down from her room to meet me; but when she beheld me with the child in my arms, a sudden faintness seemed to come over her; and stopping short, she staggered back against the banisters. Almost immediately recovering herself, however, and bursting into tears of joy, she tore the child from me—strained it to her bosom—covered it with her kisses—and addressed to it so many tender, fond, endearing things that I felt my own heart dissolving with ineffable emotions.

For two or three minutes did she thus stand upon the stairs, clasping the restored infant to her bosom: then as the first wild gush of feeling had found a vent, she fixed her eyes upon me, saying, "Mary—dear Mary—it is Providence that sent you amongst us! Words have no power to express all I feel for you. Henceforth, my dear girl——"

At this moment Lord Harlesdon appeared upon the scene, having huddled on some clothing and his dressing-gown. When he had caressed the babe, he turned towards me as I was standing near with the tears of joy dimming my eyes; and in the patronizing tone of a proud man endeavouring to play the part of a benefactor, he said, "Young woman, your conduct is good—very good indeed. How you have managed we don't know yet: but that you *have* managed to get back the child is evident enough. After breakfast come in to me in the library, and I shall make you a present of five guineas for your trouble."

"Good heavens, my lord!" cried Lady Harlesdon, in mingled shame and indignation: "how can you talk thus of a mere money-reward to this dear girl, who henceforth shall be to me as a sister?"

"My dear, my dear," said Lord Harlesdon, in a pompous tone of remonstrance, "you forget that the young woman is but a servant——"

I remained to hear no more, but glided away along the passage leading from the landing towards the back staircase, and hurried up to the nursery. My heart was swelling with conflicting emotions—gratitude towards my beloved mistress, and mingled astonishment and bitter mortification at the treatment I had just received from my master. But I soon forgot that source of annoyance—or rather experienced a mitigation of it—when on reaching the Nursery Floor I became the first to impart to poor Jemima the intelligence that the child was brought back. She was very seriously ill: but the happy tidings of which I was the bearer filled her soul with a joy which must have done her good to experience, as it did me to contemplate its reflection in her features.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PARK.

I WENT to bed: but the excitement of my feelings prevented me from sleeping; and in about an hour Lady Harlesdon, having learnt that I was awake, came up with her dear little girl in her arms. She now embraced me most affectionately—said all the kind things she could possibly conceive—and apologised a thousand times over for her husband's unfeeling and even cold-hearted way of treating the immense service I had performed. As a matter of course her ladyship was most anxious to hear how I had recovered the lost one; and I then gave her the fullest particulars connected with the adventures of the past night, suppressing only the sign of the public-house and the names of the persons engaged in the transaction. This I did to prevent rigorous measures being adopted to punish the offenders. Not that I wished to screen them on my own account: heaven forbid! They deserved to be punished; and without a pang could I have seen them sentenced to long periods of imprisonment. But I felt that it would have been repaying poor Tommy with the blackest ingratitude to adopt a course which his own particular line of proceeding had been taken in order to avert. This I candidly explained to Lady Harlesdon; and she did not press me to reveal the names which I thus purposely withheld. As for the debt which I had contracted with Mr. and Mrs. Byles, this her ladyship at once despatched a footman to discharge, sending as a gratuity a couple of guineas more than the amount actually owing.

I need not say how astonished she was at the narrative which I unfolded to her: and indeed so strange was it in many of its particulars, that I was really glad of the corroborative evidence afforded in the fact of that debt having been so incurred at Byles's house; for without such important testimony, it might have seemed that I was romancing. Not that her ladyship would for a moment have suspected me of exaggeration or falsehood: but those to whom she had to repeat the tale might have done so. It was however only to her husband and a few immediate friends, together with the servants of the household—from whom it could not well be concealed—that the narrative of my adventures was recited; because I had represented to her ladyship that if the particulars were made altogether public, and the ruffians from whom her child had been rescued should thus discover that the pretended negro and negress were none other than the poor idiot and I, they would seek some opportunity to inflict a deadly vengeance upon us both. Therefore the tale was hushed up as much as possible; and indeed everybody beneath the roof of Harlesdon House was too much rejoiced at the recovery of the innocent child, not to promise implicit secrecy as to the means adopted to accomplish the restoration.

The extraordinary degree of excitement I had

endured was followed by a proportionate reaction; and for nearly a week after the memorable adventures which I have been relating, I was very much indisposed. Lady Harlesdon behaved with the utmost kindness towards me: she not only came up twice or thrice a day to see me, but would even sit with me for an hour at a time. On one of these occasions she declared that so soon as I was perfectly recovered, I should leave the Nursery Floor altogether, and have one of the handsome spare bedrooms on the storey below; for that she no longer intended me to occupy a menial position in her household, but to become a companion to herself. She was pleased to tell me that I was as genteel as any lady of her acquaintance, and that all I wanted was fashionable apparel to make me look altogether like a lady. Such apparel did she declare that I should have; and she went on talking about the splendid jewellery that she would purchase for me, and the elegant appearance I should have when attired in the toilet which she herself would superintend. Vainly did I assure her ladyship that I should prefer remaining in my present humble situation; that as for fine clothes and jewels, my ambition did not tend in that direction; and that all I sought and all I hoped for in life was to eat the bread of honest industry. However her ladyship, thinking perhaps that I should entertain another opinion if duly put to the test, procured an immense assortment of jewellery from the establishment where she dealt, and insisted upon my making a selection. Resolutely did I refuse. I trembled indeed at the bare thought of taking so sudden a flight and becoming a fine lady all in a moment. My noble mistress was evidently astonished: she could not understand how it was possible I refused the rich ornaments which she declared would become me so well—especially, she remarked, as my two years of mourning were nearly expired, and in a few weeks I was to lay aside my black garments. But I explained to her ladyship that as it was repugnant to my feelings to become a dependant eating the bread of indolence, I preferred to remain in active service in her household; and that in such a capacity it would be outrageous and preposterous to wear fine clothes and jewels. In a word, after many conversations and battlings between her ladyship and myself on the subject, I consented to accept a plain gold ring as a testimony of her regard: but beyond this I absolutely refused everything.

Sir Aubrey Clavering remained a fortnight at the house: but I scarcely saw anything of him; for never since the first day of his arrival did he renew his visit to the nursery. If we did happen to meet on the stairs, I turned my looks away from him; and he did not once offer to speak to me. I was however glad when I heard that he was gone, and then was equally annoyed at being told that he was to join the family again in a few weeks at one of the country-seats: for as the reader may suppose, Sir Aubrey was very far from being a favourite of mine.

Lady Harlesdon now began to take me out in the carriage with her occasionally of an afternoon—ostensibly that I might bring the little Isabella for an airing, but in reality with a view of showing me special marks of her favour. She was resolved to make me her companion to some extent; and in so doing she ingeniously found an excuse for compelling me to accept of two or three new dresses. For the time of my mourning expired; and then she represented that inasmuch as Dr. Confit had ordered little Bella to be taken out for an airing in the carriage nearly every day, and as I must go to take care of her, it was requisite that I should be well dressed. Her ladyship accordingly made me accept some dresses, as I have just stated; and she selected those which, being plain but neat and tasteful, were not likely to shock my natural timidity and bashfulness by finery of colour or costliness of material. Though I penetrated all the kind artifice which pervaded these proceedings on her ladyship's part towards me, I could not refuse her presents without seeming actually over nice and far too particular in my notions: because there is a point at which it amounts to actual churlishness to refuse to become the recipient of well-meant bounties—especially when those bounties involved the bestowal of gifts which, considering our relative circumstances, I might accept.

Thus did Lady Harlesdon, with mingled generosity and delicacy, seek a variety of ways to demonstrate her gratitude towards me; and when she took me with her in the carriage she was accustomed to chat with me quite in a friendly, frank, and unconstrained manner—often amusing me with her good-humoured satire upon the prominent follies of fashionable life, instructing me upon many points of learning which the standard of my own education had not reached, and at times dazzling me with the brilliancy of her wit.

I remember I was riding in an open carriage with her ladyship one afternoon in the autumn, round "the drive" in Hyde Park. She was lounging back on the flocculent cushions with that air of fashionable lassitude which was rather a habit than natural with her—while I was seated opposite with the Hon. Miss Isabella Clementina on my lap. It was Sunday; and as at that season of the year the greater portion of the fashionable world were out of town, there were but few equipages belonging to the aristocracy of the West End to be seen in the Park. I should here observe that some particular business kept the Harlesdon family in town; but that his lordship hoped to be enabled to leave for one of his country mansions at the end of the current month. Relative to Hyde Park on the occasion now referred to, I should add that although few of the fashionable world were left in town to be driving, riding, or walking there, nevertheless there was no lack of vehicles, horsemen, and pedestrian loungers. Indeed, the Park presented a very bustling and animated appearance.

"You see, my dear Mary," said Lady Harlesdon, "that a fine Sunday fills the Park with all these gay birds whose plumage is either borrowed or else so ill-becomes them. Do look! here are all the men-milliners, linendrapers, and shop boys who have been serving one all the week, and who now come to astonish one with their appearance in the Park. Just observe! did you ever see such infamous horsemen? There goes the young man who always serves me at Howell and James's: he is evidently in excruciations to maintain his seat upon that high-trotting horse. But who is this

one that has just passed us with fixed spurs like a field-officer in plain clothes? My jeweller's young man, I declare! But ah! behold that important-looking gentleman mounted on the grey steed, and having the air of a Minister of State. That is my lord's carriage-builder! This young man who is riding in the contrary direction, and who sits so stiffly on his steed, as if he were an Egyptian mummy, is my milliner's husband. But do look! he has actually hired a groom for the day from the livery-stables, to follow him upon another hack at a little distance! Now observe those two young men in that gig: see what airs they are giving themselves! The one who drives is imitating the coachman's flourish with his whip—and his companion has got an eye-glass with which he is surveying all the female promenaders. The most superficial observer can tell that they are two choice specimens of the once-a-week dandies. But gracious goodness! who do you think they are? Two of Swan and Edgar the linen-drapers' young men! And now behold, they are actually bowing to Lady Davenport and her two daughters who are passing in their carriage. The monsters! pretending to be the acquaintances of aristocracy! Nothing can be more insufferable than these counter-coxcombs."

In this manner did Lady Harlesdon tear to pieces the company in the Park. Not that she was naturally of an illiberal disposition; but patrician prejudices and fashionable arrogances had spoilt her. For my part, I could not see why the shopmen belonging to the establishments at which her ladyship dealt should not enjoy themselves on a Sunday as well as herself or her entire circle of aristocratic friends: but it is very certain that the Aristocracy do look upon the Park as exclusively their own, and either survey all plebeian intruders with ineffable contempt, or else mercilessly lacerate them after Lady Harlesdon's fashion.

As the carriage was proceeding leisurely round "the drive," a gentleman, mounted on a splendid horse, raised his hat and approached the equipage. The coachman, who with wonderful prescience always seemed to understand when he was to pull up for any privileged acquaintance or friend of his noble mistress, at once reined in the horses; and the gentleman rode up to the carriage. He was one of those Fashionables, or Exquisites, who are to be seen only in the atmosphere of the West End—save and except upon very rare occasions, when they penetrate into the City to pay a visit to some money-lender. The gentleman of whom I am now speaking, was the Hon. Captain Lavender—an officer in the Horse Guards. He was tall, thin, and dressed with the nicest precision: but his approach was like what I had read of a ship's drawing near the Spice Islands—a gush of perfume assailing the senses with an almost overpowering effect. This was no wonder: for his hair was glossy with the most fragrant oil—his whiskers owed their lustre to a similar unguent—his breath, as he leant down to speak to her ladyship, was laden with myrrh—and when he drew forth his delicate cambric handkerchief, it exhaled the powerful scent of bergamot. He had a kind of impudent stare in the eyes; and his manner would have been by far too familiar, if it were not exquisitely polished and courtly.

Such was the gentleman who, riding up to the carriage, began addressing her ladyship with an affected drawl which admirably suited his entire appearance, but methought was wondrously inappropriate for a Captain in the Horse Guards.

"Did your ladyship ever know such intense vulgarity?" asked the Hon. Captain Lavender, as he fixed his quizzing-glass in the socket of his left eye and glanced superciliously around upon as much of the company as his look could thus embrace. "For my part I am so sickened at the sight of all these wretched linendrapers, that I have sworn never to venture into the Park again on a Sunday. The dust is suffocating, and the commonality is odious. There!" he exclaimed, waving his whip in the direction of a group of females who were walking within the barriers: "see how they are tricked out! All that yellow satins, green silks, and gaudy ribands can possibly do for them, is done: and yet anybody can tell that they no more belong to *us* than your ladyship does to *their* order. In fact, I would lay my life on it that they have come all the way from Fleet Street or Cheapside in a hackney-coach. And by Jove!" ejaculated Captain Lavender, raising his voice, "I can see a piece of straw sticking to the yellow fringe of the flaunting blue shawl!"

"O fie, Captain! you are really too severe," said Lady Harlesdon, laughing. "But joking apart, those women whom you have just pointed out, *are* particularly unsuccessful in playing the ladies of fashion."

At this moment another Exquisite, but not more than sixteen or seventeen years of age, rode up to the carriage, and having made his bow to Lady Harlesdon, said in a cracked affected tone,' "'Pon my word, I'm amazed to see your ladyship yet in town!"

"I can assure you, Mr. Bergamot," said Lady Harlesdon, "that if it had not been for his lordship's great Chancery suit, which has already cost him a hundred thousand pounds and lasted forty years, we should have been at Harlesdon Park a fortnight ago. But it is referred back again for the eleventh time to the Master, and his lordship must wait a few days to give his solicitors fresh instructions."

"And if I mistake not, it is merely to decide a right of pathway in a field on his lordship's estate?" said Captain Lavender.

"Yes—exactly so," replied Lady Harlesdon; "a field which, being a perfect swamp, is never used, and the pathway across which is of no service to anybody as it leads nowhere. But then, as my lord says, it's the principle of the thing!"

"To be sure—everything for principle!" said Mr. Bergamot, in his cracked voice. "But I say, Lavender, where were you yesterday?"

"Ah!" interrupted the Captain, with a strange affected kind of a laugh, "I know why you ask! It was your first day on guard:"—then turning to Lady Harlesdon, he added, "Our young friend here is a Cornet of six weeks' standing, recollect."

"Her ladyship knows that, Lavender, as well as you," exclaimed Mr. Bergamot, brushing his horse gently with a scented white handkerchief.

"To be sure," cried her ladyship: "for you called to show me the *Gazette* the moment your name appeared in it."

"And when his first suit of uniform was sent home," added Captain Lavender, laughing, "he put it on to walk out with his mamma and sisters."

"'Pon my word, that's too bad, Lavender!" said the young Cornet, suddenly becoming the colour of scarlet. "But I say, is it true that there's a break-up at Trevelyan's?"

"Yes—sheriffs in possession—every thing to be sold off—and Trevelyan himself in the Bench."

"Ah! I *always* thought it would come to that! I have seen it coming *for years!*" observed this young Cornet of sixteen, who must therefore have been a boy of very acute penetration when he first began to foresee the catastrophe alluded to. "But about Lady Maddox?"

"Oh! don't talk of it," exclaimed Captain Lavender. "Such a scandal! But there's Lady Davenport just riding by with her daughters; and they are sure to know all the most recent particulars!"

With these words the Hon. Captain Lavender raised his hat, wheeled round his steed, and cantered away to overtake Lady Davenport's equipage.

"A very excellent fellow is Lavender," said Mr. Bergamot the moment his friend was gone. "Somewhat too much of a fop," he continued, fanning himself with his white cambric pocket-handkerchief; "and a *leetle* highly perfumed. For my part, I think that too much scent spoils a man:"—and yet his own handkerchief was actually sprinkling the air with the most powerful odours. "Poor fellow!" he went on to observe, "I am sorry for him—deuced sorry!"—and he looked after the Captain who had at that moment overtaken and stopped Lady Davenport's carriage.

"Why—what is the matter?" inquired Lady Harlesdon, with a mysterious look, as if inviting confidence.

"What! hasn't your ladyship heard?" exclaimed Mr. Bergamot, now playing with the splendid watch-chain which festooned all over the front of his figured silk waistcoat. "Lavender is quite done up—credit gone—bankers overdrawn—not even his horses in his own name—all made over to his brother-in-law! There will be a smash soon; and between your ladyship and me, he will have to sell out."

"Ah! I understand—sell his commission and leave the army?" said Lady Harlesdon.

"O yes—it's quite notorious—every body is talking of it."

"And yet you asked him plainly enough about Mr. Trevelyan's difficulties?"

"'Pon my word, so I did! Very indiscreet of me—very indiscreet! But then," added the youthful Exquisite, arranging a lock of hair over his right eyebrow, "there's an excuse for me. I have been up all night on guard—and that's such a bore! It clouds one's ideas so!"

He then proceeded to talk a great deal more—rattling away with his cracked voice and affected manner for nearly five minutes. But all that he said amounted to this—that he had given five hundred guineas the day before yesterday for the horse he was riding, and had been offered a thousand half-an-hour afterwards by Lord Verrigreen, but that he would not take fifteen hundred—that he was in treaty for a yacht at Southampton and had sent two men to look at it, but was convinced they meant to take him in, and it didn't much matter if they did, as he should get his friend Lord Verrigreen to take it off his hands—that he had bought "Whirlwind" which won the cup at Doncaster, but didn't think he should let him run at Newmarket—that he had bets on "Hurricane" for a cool ten thousand, but had hedged so as only "to stand to lose" three thousand—and that he was engaged to dine at five places that day, and didn't know how the deuce he was to manage.

Having given utterance to all this with considerable volubility, though without much variation in the cracked tones of his voice, he lifted his hat and galloped away.

The carriage now rolled onward again; and Lady Harlesdon observed to me, "What insufferable egotists—what intolerable coxcombs—with their feminine airs and frivolities! Ah! I perceive, Mary, by your look that you wonder I remained to talk to them so long, and how I could appear so amiable and also listen with so much attention to what they said? But all this is part and parcel of fashionable life. Those young men—or rather that youth Captain Lavender, and that boy Mr. Bergamot—are average specimens of those junior sprigs of the Aristocracy who go into the army; and they make very good loungers in the Park as well as very necessary embellishments for the drawing-room. But beyond *that* I know not of what earthly service they are. Look, Mary! You see this old rumbling yellow barouche just coming through Grosvenor Gate? It is the Dowager-Countess of Bagshot's antiquated equipage; and that old frump in it is the Dowager herself. You don't know how I detest her! She is the greatest scandal-monger, the most inveterate old gossip ——But she is going to draw up!"

While her ladyship was yet speaking, the coachman, perceiving the Dowager's intention, reined in his horses once more; and the shut-up yellow barouche rumbled close up to Lady Harlesdon's light and elegant open carriage.

"My dear Countess!" exclaimed her ladyship, with the utmost amiability of tone and even an affectionate cordiality of manner, "I am delighted to see you! Indeed it was my intention to have called round to ask how you were on my way home."

"I should have been so delighted to see you," returned the Dowager-Countess, displaying her face at the barouche-window.

She was as complete a mass of counterfeit and deception as false hair, rouge, pearl powder, vegetable dye, false teeth, and all the minutest accessories of an elaborately studied toilet could possibly make her. She indeed *looked* the Dowager—portly in form, stately in demeanour, and made up with all kinds of artificialities. Her carriage was heavy and immensely roomy, with armorial bearings blazoned all over the door-panels. Her coachman, and the two footmen who stood behind, were all three middle-aged, stout, and wore powdered wigs: the very horses themselves looked plethoric and fat, even to unwieldiness.

"When do you go out of town?" asked Lady Harlesdon.

"To-morrow, thank heaven!" answered the Dowager. "Was there ever anything to equal the present dulness? I declare that nothing has oc-

curred to excite or amuse one all the week—except Trevelyan's break-up and going to the Bench—Lady Maddox's elopement with Colonel O'Shaughnessy, the red-haired Irishman—the Hon. Miss Louisa Walsingham's runaway match to Gretna—poor old Lord Gravesend's affair with the pretty milliner of Bond Street—Lady Doncaster's scandalous business with the handsome butler—old Lady Shockington's being detected cheating at cards—Sir Gregory Grey's attempt at suicide on account of difficulties—the piece of scandal at the Palace about Lady Kensington——And that, I believe, is all!" added the Dowager-Countess, as if her list of gossipping topics were not by half long enough.

"Captain Lavender was talking to me just now," observed Lady Harlesdon.

"Why, they tell me he is going to marry a fishmonger's daughter," said the Dowager-Countess, with a look and tone of such disgust that she really seemed as if she were suddenly assailed with a sense of nausea.

"Indeed!" cried Lady Harlesdon. "Young Bergamot told me that he was in difficulties."

"Oh yes—it was Lady Jerdan who has ruined him," said the Dowager.

"Lady Jerdan!" cried my mistress in evident astonishment. "Well, I never heard even a hint of this before! I thought that Lady Jerdan was the very pink of propriety."

"Oh! so her husband thinks, poor man—or rather poor old fool!"—and the Dowager-Countess pursed up her mouth with all the significancy possible.

At this moment another Exquisite, driving a tandem, and accompanied in the vehicle by one groom in a gorgeous livery of green and gold, while another followed as outrider on a splendid horse, dashed by raising his hat with elegant courtesy,—his bow being acknowledged by a most gracious salutation on the part of the Dowager and an amiable recognition on that of Lady Harlesdon.

"How admirably Lord Charles Livingstone drives!" observed Lady Harlesdon, in reference to the Exquisite who had just flown by with mad-brained speed.

"Well, I don't know," said the Dowager with a dubious shake of her head. "But by the bye, this is the first time he has shown since his retirement."

"What does your ladyship mean?" asked my noble mistress.

"Why, have you not missed him for the last six weeks or two months?" continued the Dowager. "He has been what he calls *whitewashed*, and only got out of the Bench yesterday, after having thrown over the vagabonds his creditors, as he terms them. And so now, I suppose, he will come out in grander style than ever. It's always the case with those unprincipled men about town, who never pay anybody: and then they are called high-spirited! But by the bye, dear Lady Harlesdon," added the Dowager, thrusting her old head out of the barouch-window so as to speak in a confidential whispering tone, "you deal at Langhams' the jewellers, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Lady Harlesdon.

"Then I wish you would speak a good word to them for my nephew Octavius. You know him?—that fine-spirited, high-minded young fellow who came of age the Christmas before last. Well, he has run through all his fortune—a hundred thousand pounds—and has got ninety thousand in debt; which isn't much, considering all he has spent. But those Langhams are very sore on the subject and are taking the harshest and cruellest proceedings: they even threaten to put him into the Bench. I wish you would speak a kind word. Not that they will ever receive a penny of the debt due to them; because Octavius has spent everything: but as I expect to get him out as *attaché* at Constantinople in the course of two or three months, it would mar all if he were arrested. So you will speak to the Langhams about it? It's only seven thousand that he owes them. But that unprincipled fellow Lord Livingstone, who has just dashed by in his tandem, has let them in for four thousand, which makes them so sore in respect to Octavius's debt. How infamous of Livingstone, isn't it?"

The Dowager-Countess of Bagshot then proceeded to inform Lady Harlesdon that she had been tormented to death by her cook, who was accustomed to receive the visit of a soldier down the area-steps—that she had also been plagued by a hall-porter who would not eat cold meat—that she had been compelled to change her laundress on account of being robbed of three dozen cambric handkerchiefs—that to increase her vexation the laundress laid it upon the lady's-maid and had threatened an action for slander—that her kitchen-maid had been encourgaging all the tramps in the neighbourhood by giving them broken victuals—that she had been frightened out of her life two nights back by a fire in the kitchen-chimney—that it was a very mysterious occurrence, she did not know what to think, but if she dared venture to form any opinion, it was that the fire *must* have originated from an attempt made by her next-door neighbour, Mr. Chichester, who was known to have insured heavily, to burn down his house. Finally, the Dowager-Countess of Bagshot observed that she had been to St. George's, Hanover Square, in the morning, to hear Dr. Waldegrave preach a Charity Sermon—that she had put a ten-pound note into the plate when handed round—that the sermon was very good, but she thought the reverend gentleman looked as if he had taken an extra glass of wine when he went into the vestry to put his black gown on—but that altogether the service was very impressive—and that Lady Armitage, who sate in the next pew to her own, had on such a horrid fright of a bonnet, it was positively ludicrous.

Having delivered herself of these varied pieces of intelligence, gossip, and scandal, the Dowager-Countess of Bagshot reminded Lady Harlesdon of the affair of her nephew and the Langhams, and then rolled away in her rumbling barouche.

"Was there ever such an old gossip!" exclaimed Lady Harlesdon to me, as we were again borne onward in the light and elegant open carriage. "It is always with the greatest difficulty that I can force myself to be civil to her. Now you may think, Mary, that I am really fond of scandal and tittle-tattle; I can however assure you I am not—but in high life we are compelled to yield to the prevailing customs in our own sphere and must fall into the general routine. Of course I am not blind to the faults of that odious Lady Bagshot. See how

she ran down Lord Charles Livingston as an unprincipled young man, because he has gone through a fortune and wiped off his debts: but almost in the same breath she was holding up her own nephew to admiration and esteem, although he is infinitely worse. And now she wishes to foist him upon the public purse! Then the idea of asking me to speak to the Langhams on his behalf! I will do no such thing. After all, my dear Mary, there is not a single object in the whole study of humanity more curiously and at the same time solemnly instructive than a faded Dowager of Fashion. Lady Bagshot is an example. In her youth she was a beauty; and being courted for her loveliness, considered the cultivation of the mind to be but a secondary object. Thus strong as she was in vanity, so was she weak in intellect. Her charms caught the heart—if a heart indeed he had—of Lord Bagshot, who was her equal in every way—very handsome and utterly without brains. While the careless wife sparkled and dazzled in one sphere, he dissipated and debauched in another. Years stole upon them: the Countess had to give up the dance and take to the card-table—while her husband, half ruined by his extravagances, gave up his stud and the gaming-house and took to the bottle. A fit of apoplexy carried him off; and her ladyship, after a married life of about thirty years, found herself the widowed mother of a whole tribe of girls whom she had brought up to be as vain, frivolous, and shallow-minded as herself. But inheriting her beauty, she managed to get them all off in what are called *good matches*. For, mark! however deficient in intellect a lady of fashion may be, she invariable exhibits a marvellous amount of shrewdness, cunning, and artifice, when playing the part of a manœuvring mother for her marriageable daughters. Well then, Lady Bagshot's girls being all provided for and off her hands, she finds herself at sixty-two left entirely to her own resources. These, as you may suppose, cannot be of an intellectual character. The Fashionable Intelligence in the *Morning Post*, the *Court Magazine*, and the wind-up scenes in the last new novel, constitute her sole reading. Her daughters vote their mamma an *old bore*, and never go near her. Her home, though luxurious to a degree, has no attractions for her: she must be constantly in society. Society, as she understands the term, means an assembly of some thirty or forty people squeezed round a dining-table—or some hundreds crushed into heated rooms. *There* she is in her element! When she speaks of friends, she means acquaintances; and these comprise the whole fashionable world. But with all these nominal friends, she has not a real one. She is religious in her own way—that is to say, she keeps a pew entirely for her own use at St. George's, has it well carpeted and cushioned, and visits it every Sunday to show off her own new dresses and find food for ridiculing the toilets of others. Her idea of an agreeable conversation is meeting with a congenial spirit to aid her in lacerating the reputations of all their acquaintances, male or female. Her name figures in public charities—that is to say, in the subscription lists of Societies for propagating Christianity among Cannibals who would eat up any missionaries bold enough to go among them, and distributing bibles amongst savages utterly unable to read them. Thus far you know her history. If she lives a few years longer she will be voted *a bore* not only by her daughters, but by all her acquaintances; and she will have to endure, with as much resignation as the fevered remnants of vanity will permit, the subdued laugh and covert satire of a generation rising contemporaneously with her grandchildren. Finally, she will catch a severe cold while going out to some party, bedizened with ornaments that became her well when young, but which only enhance the scare-crow hideousness of the old dowager's form: and dying at last, in spite of the dozen fashionable physicians who may surround her couch, the mockery of vanity will be perpetuated as long as possible, and she will be placed in a splendid coffin lined with crimson velvet and borne with a funeral procession consisting of twenty black coaches filled with mourners, but not one single soul amongst them really mourning, to the family vault of all the Bagshots!"

I was much amused—I might almost say instructed—by this sketch which Lady Harlesdon gave me; for it taught a moral relative to the vanities and follies of high life, which at this moment retains its impression upon my mind.

Nothing further worth mentioning took place during that Sunday afternoon's ride round the Park: and indeed I have given a description of it not so much on account of any positive connexion which it bears to the thread of my narrative, but in order to afford the reader a farther insight into Lady Harlesdon's character, and show how much a naturally fine intellect and liberal disposition had been warped and marred by the frivolities, the prejudices, and the habits of high life.

CHAPTER XXI.

HARLESDON PARK.

It was now the end of September; and the day arrived for leaving London and repairing to his lordship's country seat in Derbyshire. But before we left, I received two letters concerning which I must say a few words.

The first was from my dear brother William and gave me cheering accounts relative to himself. Mr. Collins, who was now getting on well again in his affairs, had increased William's wages and was treating him with marked confidence. Sarah and Jane were quite well, and were still the objects of Mrs. Whitfield's eccentric kindness: but as for Robert, no tidings whatsoever had been received of him. Mad Tommy had returned to Ashford and was pursuing his old career: namely, doing odd jobs, running on messages, holding horses for the farmers on market days, and turning his hand to anything honest to pick up a living.

The other letter to which I have alluded was from poor Mrs. Messiter; and as it may prove interesting to the reader, I give it exactly as it was written:—

"Dover, September, 29th 1828.

"If I have not answered your kind letter ere this, my dear girl, it has not been through want of inclination, but because a severe illness has for some weeks chained me to my bed. I am, however, now much better, thank heaven; and one of the first uses I make of my restored strength, is

to take up my pen and scribble a few lines to you. I am charmed to hear that you are in a comfortable place and that your mistress is so kind to you. God knows that a person would be cruel and unfeeling indeed not to be kind to you, dear Mary! You ask after my children—I cannot say that they are healthy and well as I could wish to see them: indeed my eldest boy seems to grow sicklier day by day—and he has such a pensive look it almost appears as if death were silently, slowly, and insidiously creeping upon him!

"I have laid down my pen to weep, Mary—and now that I am calm again, I resume my scrawl. Mr. Messiter has not been able to devote any attention to me during my illness: he is engrossed day and night in the rivalry which subsists between our establishment and Smithson's. It is a veritable war to the knife! In sadness do I record the fact that last Monday Mr. M. and Mr. Smithson came to blows in the middle of the public street and were bound over to keep the peace. Mr. M. is in a constant state of excitement from morning to night. You know how cold and sedate his looks used to be: now he is ever in a fever—almost a frenzy. Yesterday Mr. Smithson had an enormous copper tea-pot hoisted up in front of his house; and to-day Mr. M. has been to give orders to have a coffee-pot, three times as large, made immediately. In this manner pounds and pounds are flitting away—and, to tell you the truth, I am afraid that all our profits will go in maintaining this desperate warfare. Ah! my dear girl, competition is a frightful thing in trade: it *must* lead to ruin in the long run.

"You tell me that you are going to Harlesdon Park in Derbyshire. I shall write to you there as soon as I can, and at greater length than on this occasion. By the bye, you have thanked me for having been in some little degree instrumental in obtaining for your present place. I can only say that I spoke of you at the time to Lady Harlesdon as I thought you deserved. And may you ever continue to deserve such commendations!

"God bless you, dear Mary. Your affectionate friend,

"Fanny Messiter."

The poor woman had wept over her letter, as she said: the traces of her tears were *there*—and I wept also as I read it. Alas! though so few

and guarded were the words of that sentence in which she spoke of the inability of her husband to show her any attention during her illness, yet for one who knew the man's character, what a world of meaning was there in those concise syllables! Patient, enduring, and resigned, she not merely submitted to all her husband's tyranny and neglect, but actually endeavoured to veil his faults, or glance at them in the most delicate manner possible. I wept on her account—and also on behalf of that poor, pensive, sweet-tempered boy, the breaking of whose spirit beneath a father's crushing tyranny had no doubt predisposed his constitution for the seeds of an insidious disease which was now undermining him.

The morning for departure arrived—the travelling-carriages were in readiness at an early hour—and the journey into Derbyshire was commenced. Jemima, who had quite recovered her health again, and who through my intercessions had been permitted to retain her place, was my companion inside one of the carriages; and as a matter of course we had the three children with us. But passing over any details connected with the journey, let the reader suppose us safely arrived at Harlesdon Park; and it may easily be imagined that on the following morning I was up betimes to take a survey of the surrounding scenery.

The mansion was spacious and handsome—situated at a little distance from Belper, amidst the most beautiful landscapes of which the charming Midland county could boast. The River Derwent passed through the immense estate, which presented an aspect so richly diversified with natural beauties that I have never seen the equal. In many parts the banks of the winding stream were luxuriantly wooded; and beneath the shade of the uniting branches of oak, ash, alder, and elm, the limpid water was sometimes secluded from the eye, becoming a musical companion for the ear alone—till suddenly emerging into the glorious sunlight again, it spread across an open plain, meandered through a peaceful valley, or was seen winding its way round some noble height whose dark sides it reflected as it glided beneath. Ascending such a height as this, a splendid view was obtained of the rich cultivated lands constituting the Harlesdon estate, so full of tall trees, hedgerows, and plantations, that the yellow stubble-fields could hardly be perceived amidst the warm though autumn-tinted greens of the foliage. Here on one side was a wooded bank, above which might be seen the ascent of pasture-land that rose up behind, and which stretching away, joined the hills or the wide downs that formed the rolling landscape. The scene, though full of repose, was very far from being melancholy. The partridges might be heard calling in the stubble-fields; the blackbirds were flying from hedge to hedge, with that peculiar note between a twitter and a song which forms the choral hymn wherewith they close their melody for the year; and in the woods overhanging the Derwent myriads of feathered choristers seemed to weave their metallic and fluid tones into music finer and softer than silver bells or crystal streamlets ever made.

Such were my impressions on taking the first survey of the charming scenery on his lordship's estate of Harlesdon Park. But I had not been there many days before I began to find out that where nature was delightful even to the realization of those ideas which at times steal into our fancy relative to the lost Paradise of our First Parents, the heart of man was not free from care nor his lot from distress or suffering. Indeed the peasantry on Lord Harlesdon's estate were very far from either being happy or prosperous. Over-worked and wretchedly paid by the tenant-farmers—oppressed by his lordship's bailiff—watched by my lord's gamekeepers—and standing in mortal terror of the local parsons, nearly all of whom were Justices of the Peace,—the peasantry were in reality nothing better than serfs or bondsmen; while his lordship himself was regarded with all the awe and reverence as well as dread that could possibly have been shown to a feudal baron. Whenever he rode on horseback over his estate, he expected to receive every proof of submission and every testimonial of abject servility. The labourers were to stand hat in hand as he passed, and were to run and open the gates of the fields for the great man: the women curtsied, and little children were taught by their parents to pay a great deal more deference to his lordship upon earth than to the Lord in heaven. The parochial schoolmaster of the nearest village had his children drawn up in a little infantile regiment to do honour to my lord; and, in a word, a stranger from some distant clime, unacquainted with English social distinctions, would have fancied that Lord Harlesdon was some being of quite a different mould from those who thus regarded him with so degraded and debasing a servility.

However, upon these particulars I need not dwell any longer at present;—and to continue my narrative I may observe that ten days after the arrival of the family at the Park, Sir Aubrey Clavering came to pay his promised visit. He was attended by a valet and a groom. Of this latter it is necessary to say a few words. His name was John Morley: he was short in stature, but what is called dapper-made, and exactly suited for a groom who at times had to stand behind a cabriolet or accompany his master in a light gig. He had red hair, and was much marked with the small pox—therefore not very prepossessing. Nevertheless, he was a person of inordinate conceit—fancied that every female was in love with him—and was most impudent in his familiarity. His age was about six-and-twenty; and he enjoyed his master's unlimited confidence.

We had been about a fortnight at Harlesdon Park; and it was three or four days after the arrival of Sir Aubrey Clavering and his servants that the following incident took place.

It was about nine o'clock on a lovely evening, in the middle of October, that I descended from the nursery into the garden at the back of the mansion to take a little ramble for a few minutes, as I had a slight head ache. The children had been put to bed some time—Jemima was with them—and I had seized the opportunity to enjoy this little stroll by myself, not merely for the sake of the fresh air but likewise to give way to my reflections. It was a clear beautiful night, remarkably warm for the season of the year; and such a perfect stillness prevailed that the soul seemed to imbibe peace and comfort from the soft tranquillity of nature. I had walked up and down the principal avenue in the garden for about a quarter

of an hour, when I suddenly heard footsteps approaching; and by their tread I knew them to be those of a man with boots. The suspicion instantaneously flashed to my brain that it might be Sir Aubrey Clavering; and in the terror which at the moment seized upon me, I so far lost my presence of mind that instead of proceeding onward with a proper dignity and courage, I glided into an arbour formed by a group of shrubs and creeping plants most artistically and tastefully interwoven. But in order that the present scene may be fully understood, I must observe that this arbour was of a circular form, and was divided into two compartments by a green trellis-work so thickly covered over with the mingling foliage and flowers as to form a complete screen or wall. Each compartment was furnished with seats and had its own entrance, so that the arrangement might be described as two arbours joining each other: and it is of course apparent enough to the reader that while a person in one might be unconscious of the presence of any body in the other, yet that if any words were spoken they could be plainly heard in either compartment.

Into one of these divisions had I glided in the manner already described upon hearing male footsteps approaching: but all of a sudden those sounds ceased, and then there was a slight rustling amidst the shrubs as if the individual, whoever he were, had diverged from the gravel-walk and concealed himself amongst the evergreens. Now all was still again: but I experienced so powerful a feeling of alarm that I remained in the arbour irresolute how to act; for I had the conviction strong in my mind that some ambush was being laid, though for what purpose and by whom I knew not. Nevertheless, the antecedents of Sir Aubrey Clavering naturally made me suspicious concerning him; and yet it struck me as improbable that he should be lying in wait for me so near the house, where my screams could not fail to be heard.

But while I was thus losing myself as it were in a maze of doubts and uncertainties, I suddenly became aware that footsteps were approaching the arbour on the opposite side; and ere I could make up my mind to the adoption of any particular course, two persons entered the *other* compartment of the verdant retreat.

"Dearest, dearest Clementina," immediately said a voice, which, though low and full of tenderness, I at once recognized as that of Sir Aubrey Clavering: "how delightful to have found this opportunity to be alone together for a few minutes!"

"Ah! my beloved Aubrey, I have so longed for such a moment as this!" replied a soft and melting female voice, which I likewise knew at once: it was that of noble mistress!

Heavens! what consternation and dismay now seized upon me! I was rooted to the seat—not daring to move an inch—yet most unwillingly playing the eavesdropper. Not for worlds would I have been voluntarily placed in such a position: but how to extricate myself without betraying my presence there at all? A pitchy darkness prevailed within the arbour; for not only was its own verdure dense with the interlacing boughs and foliage, but around and above was it within the shade of tall trees. It was therefore impossible that I could be *seen*: but then I was most unwilling to remain there another instant—for the secret I had already learnt (or rather this confirmation of a pre-existing suspicion) had filled me with trouble and agitation. While I thus sat motionless as a statue, yet with all my thoughts agitating painfully and conflictingly, a new phase in the adventure developed itself: for through the deep gloom I suddenly beheld the form of a man steal into the very compartment where I was seated. No snake could glide more noiselessly; and not a garment rustled, nor was a leaf of the foliage disturbed, as he sat himself down on the bench where I also was seated, and within a couple of feet of me! Thus, though with an acute keenness of the faculties, I not only became aware of his presence but also of the exact spot where he placed himself, yet did *he* remain in total unconsciousness of the circumstance that any one was so near him on the *same* bench. It nevertheless struck me that he was not only aware of persons being in the *other* division of the arbour, but that he had crept thus stealthily hither to listen to what was going forward. The most terrible alarm swept through my brain. I fancied that the individual near me might be Lord Harlesdon; and the blood ran cold in my veins as I thought of the tremendous peril which my mistress now incurred. But the paralysis of dismay was upon me—sealing my lips—keeping me motionless as a statue—petrifying me in fact from head to foot; so that if ten thousand reputations were involved at the moment, I could not have given utterance to a syllable nor moved hand nor foot to save one of them.

But during the minute or two which elapsed after that interchange of tender expressions between Clavering and Lady Harlesdon,—and while the unknown figure had glided into my division of the arbour and had placed himself so noiselessly upon the seat,—the conversation had continued in a subdued but still plainly audible tone, between the Baronet and her ladyship.

"It seems scarcely possible," said the latter, "that you should have been here already three or four days, and that the present should be the first opportunity which we have had of being alone together. Ah! my dear Aubrey," she continued in accents of the most melting emotion, "what should I do without the solace of your love?"

"And I, dearest," he answered; "think you that I am indifferent to the sweet affection which you cherish for me? Think you I have forgotten how, when we were mere boy and girl, so to speak, our love began?"

"Oh! would to God that we had fled and married each other *then!*" exclaimed Lady Harlesdon, with a sudden outburst of passionate feeling.

"You forget, dearest, that I was at the time but a youth alike obscure and poor—a mere ensign in the army with nothing but my pay, and no hope nor prospect of ever being more than apprised subaltern. For it was impossible to foresee that my cousin Sir Wyndham, then in the full vigour of health, and himself a comparatively young man, was destined so soon to be hurried out of this world——"

"No, no—we could not foresee all that, Aubrey," interrupted Lady Harlesdon, with a kind of hysterical vehemence, as if she were tortured by many vain regrets relative to the past: "but that fervid love which we cherished for each other should have inspired us with a more sublime confidence. Ye

strong as that love was in itself, weak was it and even cowardly in its hopelessness and its despair!"

"Why—Oh! why, dearest Clementina, this ebullition of regretful outpourings now?" asked Sir Aubrey, in accents that were partially soothing and partially reproachful. "Did I not manifest the most tender forbearance towards you from the very first? Did I not set aside all selfish considerations? For at the time when our love began, and I was but a poor ensign without hope and almost without prospects, did it not seem my interest to induce *you*, the brilliant daughter of a rich and noble house, to fly away with *me* and become my wife? Was not such an alliance tempting enough for the poor subaltern? But no—I was not so selfish nor so base as to sacrifice you to my own worldly interests! I counselled you to receive the addresses of Lord Harlesdon, who at the time was proposing for your hand——"

"And would to heaven, Aubrey," interrupted the lady passionately, "that you had never, never given me such advice! For you know, my well-beloved, that I am not naturally of a depraved heart or profligate disposition; and you will give me credit for the truth when I assure you that often and often is my soul racked with the agonies of remorse when I think of my infidelity towards a confiding husband. Besides," she continued, in a tone that gradually became filled with a deep and mournful pathos, "my guilty conscience suggests a thousand hypocrisies in order to veil my fault. If ever my husband looks earnestly upon me, I always fancy that he is reading the secret of my heart, and I lavish upon him a myriad of caressing tendernesses in order to lull or avert anything savouring of suspicion: though heaven knows that none of the genuine feeling of my soul enters into the marks of fondness thus bestowed! O my beloved Aubrey, I feel that my existence is one incessant falsehood—one tremendous deceit: and there are moments when I shudder to the lowest confines of my whole being as it strikes me that all this fabric of guilt, hypocrisy, and crime must fall in some day with a sudden and appalling crash!"

"Good God, dearest Clementina!" cried Sir Aubrey; "in what an unusual current your thoughts are flowing to-night!—and I who fancied that this half-hour which we were to steal so pleasantly in order to pass with each other, was to be full of love's tenderness, fondness, and caresses, instead of misgivings, apprehensions, and repinings! Besides, you speak of crime and guilt—and those are harsh words, dearest, to apply unto yourself."

"No, Aubrey, they are not harsh—they are not too severe—because they express the truth," replied Lady Harlesdon in a firmer tone, but still with accents of a mournful lament: "and however unpalatable this truth may be, it is impossible to deaden one's convictions or susceptibilities against it. Listen to me with patience, I beseech you. I say then that I use the words *crime* and *guilt*, because this love of our's has long been criminal, and my conduct even from the very day that I became Lord Harlesdon's wife has been stamped with a foul guiltiness. You counselled me to accept as my husband that old man—old enough to be my grandsire—in preference to any other suitor: for you know that I *had* many suitors at the time! And I *did* accept him—and many and many a friend was astonished at the circumstance of my accompanying that old, old man to the altar. Ah! my dear Aubrey, although the thought was not expressed in words between you and me, yet can we lay our hands upon our hearts and affirm that such thought was not harboured there at the time, when *you* counselled and *I* agreed that I should wed Lord Harlesdon? And that thought to which I refer, was it not that this marriage was but to serve as a sort of cloak—a veil—a convenience, for our own secret love? And has it not been so? Oh! there is never a day when I gaze upon those dear children and in the innermost recesses of my own heart whisper to myself that your image is stamped upon them,—there is never a day, I repeat, that I do not feel as if I were the guiltiest wretch alive, and that God's vengeance must sooner or later alight upon my head!"

"Good heavens, Clementina, continue not in this distressing strain!" ejaculated Sir Aubrey Clavering. "What is the matter with you to-night? what have you uppermost in your mind? Some painful thought is torturing you now——"

"Think you not, Aubrey," asked her ladyship, with a strange bitterness suddenly penetrating her accents, "that the punishment of such guilt as mine is but too often destined to commence upon earth? and sadly, sadly do I fear that mine has already begun!"

"What in heaven's name do you mean, Clementina?" asked Sir Aubrey Clavering, in a voice which expressed his surprise and dismay at this announcement.

"Oh! it is doubtless the fate of all who love in fondness but in guilt," returned Lady Harlesdon in a deep voice, "to be punished through the medium of their own unhallowed affections."

"You speak in enigmas, Clementina," observed Clavering, almost angrily. "Pray explain yourself."

"Ah! I can hear by your accents that you half suspect my meaning," she rejoined.

"No—on my soul I do not," he exclaimed vehemently.

"Then let me tell you the truth," continued Lady Harlesdon. "I feel convinced that you are faithless to me——Nay, do not start thus! I cannot hope nor expect otherwise: but yet the conviction has not the less its pang. You remember the day on which you came to stay with us in Grosvenor Square after our return from the Continent? On that very day was it I received the proof of your unfaithfulness; and from that moment my unhappiness has been stamped."

"What! are we to renew the scene which took place between you and me that day?" exclaimed Clavering. "You discovered that it was about the girl Mary Price that Eustace and I had that ridiculous duel——ridiculous, I say, because we never ought to have quarrelled for such a thing. But is it possible that just because in the passing freak of the moment I meant to snatch a kiss from a nursery-maid, you are going to make both yourself and me miserable?"

"Do not treat the matter with this unbecoming levity," said Lady Harlesdon. "Mary is a young creature who never could possibly have encouraged such a freedom; and therefore must you have been inspired with something more than a mere fleeting interest. For she is exceedingly

pretty and lady-like—fine dark eyes, magnificent black hair, a beautiful set of teeth, and an excellent figure! Therefore——"

"Oh! therefore—therefore—you are jealous!" exclaimed Clavering, with a mocking laugh. "Really this is too bad. You want to persuade me, or rather have tried to persuade yourself, that I am in love with Mary Price!"

"Aubrey, do not speak with irony—do not treat me thus," said Lady Harlesdon, in a tone of gentle remonstrance. "I am not torturing myself with vain chimeras. The day before yesterday, when Mary entered the drawing-room with Bella in her arms, you seemed to be gazing affectionately upon the child; but I could distinguish plainly enough that your glances took a somewhat more sidelong direction and were fixed upon Mary——"

"By heaven! you are travelling out of your way to pick a quarrel!" cried Sir Aubrey. "Is it for *that* we sought the retirement of this place and this hour? or was it to exchange vows of eternal love?"

"Aye—but of what use these vows?" interrupted Lady Harlesdon. "I tell you, Aubrey, that Mary's image is to a certain extent impressed upon your mind; and I lament the circumstance far more than I can express—not merely because it is a proof that your love for me is waning, but also because she is a good girl—a virtuous girl—and a noble-minded girl—and not for worlds would I see her become the object of persecution on your part! I am well aware that you entertain no honourable intentions towards her—that marriage, in a word, is out of the question. I shudder therefore when I reflect that your views must be dishonourable——Ah!" cried Lady Harlesdon, suddenly interrupting herself, "have you forgotten that it was this same generous-hearted girl who risked her very life to rescue our child from the hands of the vilest of the vile?"

"I see that you are determined we shall quarrel, Clementina," said Sir Aubrey Clavering in a cold voice. "You obstinately persevere in attributing to me views which never for an instant attained the slightest consistency in my breast. As for looking at Mary Price in an improper manner, I utterly deny it. But come," he added, somewhat softened as the sounds of Lady Harlesdon's sobbings met his ear and probably smote upon his heart: "for heaven's sake do not give way to grief in this manner! What can I do—what can I say—to pacify you? Most solemnly I swear that I have not spoken to Mary Price once since she has been in your service! But if you are really so absurdly jealous as all this, why not send the girl away?"

"Aubrey," cried her ladyship, evidently with a sudden start, "I am surprised at you. What! send away this young woman who saved our child——"

"But I meant to have her well provided for," remarked Clavering.

"No—never, never!" exclaimed Lady Harlesdon vehemently. "Even if what you term my jealousy were to rise to ever so great a pitch, nevertheless so long as Mary Price herself remained innocent of any participation in the cause, would I persist in keeping her with me. I would rather—Oh! ten thousand times rather sacrifice my own feelings than do an act of injustice towards her!"

"Well, I only suggested that you should part with the girl," observed Clavering, "in order to establish peace between you and me. But perhaps," he immediately added in a cold and almost taunting tone, "you would like *me* to take my departure?"

"Ah! cruel, cruel Aubrey!" cried her ladyship: "I did not think you would torture me thus. But if, after all, I have wronged you—if I have been unjust towards you in respect to Mary Price—pardon me, pardon me: for you know not—Oh! you know not, how necessary it is that I should be loved by you!"

"Do not be jealous of me any longer, Clementina," returned Clavering; "but have faith in my love. Why do I remain unmarried? Is it not for *your* sake? Is it not in the hope that Lord Harlesdon must soon pay the debt of nature——"

"Oh! hush, hush—we must be more guarded!" murmured her ladyship: and then her words were succeeded by the sounds of kisses. "Now let us re-enter the house," she hastily said: and immediately afterwards the retreating footsteps of the fond but guilty pair indicated their departure from the scene of this singular and romantic conversation.

But scarcely had the sounds of those footsteps ceased to reach my ears, when the individual who had been listening in the same compartment with myself suddenly arose to leave the place; and in so doing his hand encountered my dress. Then, with an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm, he seized upon me, demanding, "Who is it? who are you?"

A cry of terror had escaped my lips at the moment I was thus seized upon: but the very next instant the sound of the man's voice conveyed a sudden feeling of relief to my soul—for instead of being Lord Harlesdon, as I had expected, the intruder was John Morley, Sir Aubrey Clavering's groom.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RIDE.

BEFORE I continue the narrative I must pause for the purpose of saying something in self-justification: for it may appear alike singular and improper to a degree that I should have remained during an entire half-hour a listener to a conversation upon topics as sacred as they were delicate. Let the reader, however, place himself or herself in my position for a few minutes, and it will easily be perceived that, painful as the course was, I had none other to adopt than to remain silent and motionless there. For at the outset I was so paralysed with consternation as to be rendered utterly incapable of either speech or motion,—while the presence of that other individual at first prolonged this powerlessness to act on my part, and subsequently proved the source of the most bewildering uncertainty. For when I began to recover somewhat from the dismay that enchained me to my place, the conversation had advanced so far as to reveal the *one* grand important truth—namely, the illicit love subsisting between Lady Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Claver-

ing. If I had made the slightest movement then, I should only have suddenly startled and alarmed the individual near me, and have thus betrayed to the lovers the fact that they had been overheard by no less than two persons. And if I had thus made them aware of my own and the other individual's presence, would Lady Harlesdon for a single instant have believed my tale? would she have been induced to imagine that I was there accidentally? could she be made to suppose that I was too profoundly absorbed in terror to cry out at first? No—it was not probable; and I should have been regarded in the light of a despicable eaves-dropper—or what was worse, a paid and secret spy upon her actions. In addition to all these reasons for remaining quiet where I was, there was the awe-inspiring idea that my companion in that particular compartment of the arbour was Lord Harlesdon; and thus altogether did a variety of feelings combine to retain me there silent and motionless until the end.

The reader may also understand how, for my noble mistress's sake, I suddenly experienced an immense relief in discovering that the hitherto unknown individual in the same compartment with myself, instead of being Lord Harlesdon, was merely Sir Aubrey's groom: for despite her frailty and her wickedness in respect to this unfortunate love of her's, I could not help sympathizing deeply with my poor mistress: and bad though it were to have her secret thus pryed into at all, still was it much better that the spy in the present case should be a menial, most probably easy to be bribed, rather than an outraged husband who could only have remained silent so long because brooding over the most deadly vengeance.

"Who are you? who is it?" were the hurried questions put by John Morley as he clutched both my shoulders with his hands.

"Release me—it is I, Mary Price!" was my answer.

"Mary Price!" he exclaimed, instantaneously relinquishing his hold upon me, and starting back in evident amazement—although I could not observe his countenance in the pitchy darkness which prevailed. "Well, upon my word, if you have not heard enough about yourself to make you as vain as possible——"

"Do not talk thus," interrupted I, now completely recovering my presence of mind. "I can assure you that it was by the merest accident in the world I found myself at such a moment here at all. And now good night."

I was hurrying out of the arbour when Morley caught me forcibly by the arm, crying, "Stop a moment—don't be in such dreadful haste!"

"Release me—unhand me—I command you!" were the words that now issued from my lips: for I felt all the inconvenience of being alone at such an hour and in such a place with a male companion. "If you wish to speak to me I will come down to the servants' hall presently."

"Oh! that be hanged," cried Morley, still retaining me by the arm. "You are such a fine lady you never come amongst the servants."

"Because my occupations keep me in the nursery," was my response: and with a desperate effort I struggled to get away—but the brutal fellow grasped me more violently than before; and flinging me back upon the seat he posted himself in the entrance-way, where his form appeared like a black shape darker than the darkness.

"There now—who's the strongest?" he said with a mocking laugh. "But I didn't mean to hurt you, pretty Mary—for you *are* a sweet girl, as her ladyship said just now to my master."

"I do implore you to let me go," said I, in a voice of earnest entreaty. "What would be thought if any one came here?"

"Why, that we are doing just what our betters have done before us," he exclaimed: "making love to each other, to be sure."

"I insist that you let me pass immediately," I said, indignation now arming me with courage: and I endeavoured to force my way out.

"You shan't do it, you little vixen!" he cried, again forcing me back: and not choosing to encourage his brutality by farther opposition or resistance on my part, I resolved upon a compromise.

"Tell me what you wish to say to me," said I, "and I will answer you quickly. But pray do not be ungenerous enough to keep me here much longer. I have never injured you; and I can scarcely think you would wish to inflict upon me so serious an injury as I should sustain if discovered here under such circumstances."

"Then why, my pretty maid, do you thrust yourself into such a bothering mess?" asked Morley. "*I* don't deny having come to play the eaves-dropper: but *you* would like to make me believe just the reverse about yourself."

"As I have a soul to be saved I am both innocent and incapable of voluntarily playing the spy——"

"Now enough of this nonsense, Miss Mary," interrupted the groom. "I know better: all appearances are against you! You wouldn't believe me if I told you a similar tale. Then what I want is soon explained: for as it seems that we are both rowing in the same boat, I think we might row together. In plain terms, let's compare notes and pull with each other."

"It is useless," interrupted I, "to continue in this strain:"—and my accents must have sounded full of scorn and mingled indignation. "Loathing the avocation of spy, and having been made one most painfully against my will, I have no object in co-operating with you. If you do not believe me now, you must think what you will: but the real truth can not be affected by your opinion."

John Morley said nothing for several moments; and I therefore concluded that my words had somewhat startled him.

"Well," said he at length, "you are a queer girl, and I can't make you out. I must think over it. But I say, Mary, you and I don't know much of each other, it is true—for this is but the third or fourth time we have seen each other, if *seeing* on the present occasion it is at all. In any case we have only known each other for three or four days; but if you would let me keep company with you, you would find me an honourable and loving sweetheart——"

"Once again I beg of you to let me depart," said I, feeling that my cheeks were burning with indignation.

"Well, I don't want to provoke you," he said: "but perhaps you will think over what I have just been mentioning."

I made him no answer; but as he stood aside to let me pass, I shot away with the speed of an arrow, and regaining the house, hurried up to the nursery. It was now close upon ten o'clock; and Jemima wanted to go down and have her usual half-hour's chat in the servants' hall. She accordingly hastened from the nursery the moment I reappeared, and I went to bed. But I could not sleep for a long time. All that had taken place in the garden kept reproducing itself in my memory. At one moment I found myself deeply lamenting Lady Harlesdon's cruel destiny—so tenderly loving one individual, and being indissolubly united to another: then I felt shocked at the depravity which had been this evening revealed to my ears—a marriage that had taken place as a cover to a guilty amour, and the duped husband fondly hugging the belief that the children who bore his name were really his own! Next I felt my soul deeply moved with grateful tenderness towards Lady Harlesdon for the generous manner in which she had spoken of me, and the ingenuous firmness with which she had announced her readiness to make any personal sacrifice of her own feelings rather than behave unkindly towards me: and then again I experienced the deepest vexation and annoyance to think that my presence in the household should, by provoking her jealousy, be a source of grief to my noble mistress. Altogether, I saw so many traits in her ladyship's conduct to make me pity her misfortunes, condemn her want of moral firmness, deplore her errors, admire her generosity, and feel grateful for her goodness in respect to myself, that perhaps no woman had ever inspired so many different feelings as her ladyship excited in my breast.

From the above reflections it naturally resulted that I should deliberate with myself what course I was to pursue. Should I remain in her ladyship's service to be an object of jealousy to herself and of dishonourable regard on the part of Sir Aubrey Clavering? But if I were to leave, what reason could I give? I dared not tell the truth: because that would be to confess that I had overheard the conversation in the arbour—and I scorned the idea of inventing a false pretext. Then again, should I allow my kind mistress to remain unconscious of the danger that threatened her reputation and perhaps menaced her with utter ruin?—I mean the espial instituted by Morley. For was there not every reason to apprehend that he was either already employed to watch her ladyship and his own master, or else that he would unhesitatingly sell the secret to Lord Harlesdon at any moment? What did he mean by observing that it seemed as if we were both rowing together and that we ought to compare notes and pull with each other? Did it not imply, either that he already had a special object in view in thus enacting the spy, or that he at least had some ulterior purpose to serve? That such object or purpose could be favourable to her ladyship, was not to be supposed; and should I allow her to remain in ignorance of the impending danger? It would be cruel:—yet how was I to warn her? Only by making her aware of how everything which took place between herself and Clavering had been overheard by Morley and me!—and then what would she think of me? No: I must leave the whole affair to chance, and refrain from meddling in it.

Such was the resolve to which I came after at least two hours' reflection and wildering deliberation;—and then I fell asleep. Unpleasant dreams pursued me throughout that night: and I arose in the morning with a feeling as if something unpleasant was about to happen. A presentiment of evil hovered in my mind, and it appeared to me as if this secret with which I had now become acquainted respecting my mistress and Sir Aubrey Clavering was destined to have the effect of a malignant spell. I however strove to assume as much cheerfulness as possible, so as to avoid being questioned by Jemima; and I longed to get breakfast over that I might go forth into the fresh air and court the exhilarating breeze.

It was a lovely morning—the sun was shining brightly—and I was just dressing to accompany Jemima for a walk with the children, when a message was brought up by a page to the nursery, that I was to go out with my lord and her ladyship in the carriage, and was to take Isabella with me. This announcement struck both me and Jemima with something like astonishment: for it was the first time that ever Lord Harlesdon was known to take any of the children in the same carriage with himself—much less suffer a servant to sit within the same atmosphere that was breathed by his lordship!

"I suppose he is growing affectionate as he gets nearer towards his dotage," observed Jemima. "But after all, you are a favourite with both my lord and her ladyship. And so you deserve to be," she added with frank good-humour; "considering how you rescued little Bella there."

To be brief, I hastily put on my best clothes—apparelled Miss Isabella, who was now eighteen months old, in her best also—and then proceeded down stairs. A large open barouche was in waiting; and when I reached the hall I found Lord and Lady Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Clavering all three dressed for going out, and just issuing forth to the carriage. Lady Harlesdon was leaning on her husband's arm: Sir Aubrey was walking by her side. As I made my appearance, Lord Harlesdon exclaimed, "Ah! here's Mary with Bella. How well the little dear looks!"—and he stopped to caress the child.

I do not know how it was, but it struck me at the moment that there was something strange, unnatural, and forced in his lordship's tone. His voice resounded with a gaiety to which he was not wont to give way; and methought it was assumed, and even had a tinge of sardonism in it. That some uneasy feeling must have been excited at the same moment in Lady Harlesdon's bosom, struck me likewise: for she flung a quick anxious glance at her husband, as if to read his meaning—then her eyes settled upon the child, whom she caressed lovingly—and the next moment she gave a side-long look at Clavering, who answered with a brief but tender smile.

"Now let us haste to the carriage," said Lord Harlesdon, in a voice full of cheerfulness. "It is a lovely morning; and I feel myself as well, as healthy, and as strong as if I were young again. Ah! to be young again—*that* would be glorious!"—and he laughed as if exulting in the idea: but there was something in that laugh which sounded hollow and unnatural to my ears, and again did I observe the quick searching look flung from

Lady Harlesdon's eyes upon her husband's countenance, and then instantly averted again, but this time with a more lingering expression of uneasiness and doubt in it.

"Now, my dear," continued the nobleman, as he handed his wife into the carriage, "you shall sit here, and I shall sit next to you, because neither you nor I can ride with our backs to the horses. Come, Clavering, help Mary in: she has got the child in her arms, poor girl, and cannot get in by herself—besides which she deserves to be treated like a lady after her heroic conduct in London."

So confused did I become when his lordship told Sir Aubrey Clavering to hand me into the vehicle, that in my haste to scramble in so as to avoid receiving the slightest assistance from him, I nearly fell; and as a matter of course had there been ten thousand Lady Harlesdons to make jealous or offend, Sir Aubrey could not do otherwise than catch hold of my arm to sustain me and then assist me into the barouche. As I took my seat I felt that I was the colour of scarlet, not only because of my own awkwardness in having thus rendered it necessary for the baronet to hand me in, but also because of the remarks which Lord Harlesdon went on to make as above recorded. Sir Aubrey leapt in after me, and of course had to place himself by my side, we occupying the seat with our backs to the horses. The footman threw up the steps, closed the door, and jumped up into the box behind: and away rolled the equipage, down the gently sloping gravel road which threaded the immense park.

For nearly a minute did I remain so confused and bewildered that I kept my looks bent down upon the face of the child sleeping in my lap, till I gradually felt that the hues on my cheeks were abating the deepness of their crimson. Then I ventured to look up towards the countenance of Lady Harlesdon, facing whom I was seated; and it immediately struck me that her features wore an expression of mingled terror and misgiving, which she could not altogether conceal, much less subdue.

"It is not often that I find time to take any of the children out with me," observed Lord Harlesdon: "but now that we are here at the Park for pleasure, and I have got more time at my disposal, I shall often play the paternal in this manner."

Then he laughed: but methought there was something malicious in his mirth—and as I glanced at Lady Harlesdon again, I was now more than at first convinced that she experienced a sort of inward consternation and shared my belief that there was something unnatural and forced in the conduct, bearing, and language of his lordship. How Sir Aubrey looked I cannot say; for I did not choose to turn my eyes towards him.

"My dear Clementina," resumed Lord Harlesdon, now addressing himself direct to his wife, "I am sure this airing will do you a great deal of good. You did not feel disposed to come out this forenoon when I recommended it at breakfast just now; but I fancied you looked rather pale, and knew that the fresh breeze would benefit you. Already indeed is the colour coming back to your cheeks; and we have not been out yet for half-an-hour. Look, Sir Aubrey! is not her ladyship the very picture of health at this moment? You who are so old a friend of the family, can judge whether her ladyship looks as well as she did three or four years back?"

All this was said in accents that jarred strangely upon my nerves; and I therefore felt convinced it must have sounded more ominously still to Lady Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Clavering: for underneath that gloss of buoyant good-humour and exhilarating gaiety which Lord Harlesdon assumed, there seemed to be a certain maliciousness and hidden sarcasm. But the hues of the rose had indeed deepened upon the countenance of her ladyship, and kept deepening there too more and more every instant as her husband continued speaking—until so great, and indeed so visible became her confusion as well as the inward terror which oppressed her, that she abruptly averted her head and I saw the big tears roll down her cheeks. Then I glanced towards Lord Harlesdon; and it struck me that I caught at the moment upon his features an expression of gratified malice at the instant it was flitting away.

"By the bye, Clavering," resumed his lordship, now speaking in so familiar and confidential a tone that I began to think all my apprehensions and suspicions concerning his looks and manner were unfounded after all,—"did you see that paragraph in the *Morning Post* about Lady Maddox?"

"No—I cannot say that I did," answered Sir Aubrey. "What was it?"

"Why, you know her ladyship ran away with Colonel O'Shaughnessey about a month ago; and it created a terrible scandal in London. Did it not, my dear?"—and he turned towards Lady Harlesdon.

"Yes—I believe so," she replied, having recovered her presence of mind, though not without a great effort, as with pain and sorrow I had too clearly seen.

"Ah! I thought so," observed his lordship. "Those kind of things always do create a scandal; and therefore a husband is a fool for creating an exposure when he discovers that his wife has deceived him. Pshaw! it is so common in high life—in *our* sphere, you know—that some means should be devised to deal with it differently from what it has been. Outraged husbands appear to think there are but two ways of treating the matter—either of challenging to a duel the author of their dishonour, or in suing him for damages in the Court of King's Bench. Just as if there were no other means of revenge! I can recommend a dozen—and indeed have a very great mind to publish a book on the subject. The idea of an injured husband risking his own life in order to get the chance of taking that of his wife's seducer!—or in suing the villain for damages which perhaps will be never paid, or which, if paid, the scoundrel would not miss! No, no—all that is not common sense. Those were the resources of a barbarian age: now-a-days the revenge should be as exquisite as the refinement of the circle in which the *faux pas* takes place."

Again did it strike me that there was a strangeness in his lordship's tone—a covert malice and likewise a sort of passionate vehemence in his words; as if he himself felt all he was saying and identified himself completely therein. That Lady Harlesdon was smitten with the same idea I felt convinced: for I saw her shudder visibly, as if with the icy shock given by the concentrated terror within—while the glitter of uneasiness shone perceptibly in her fine azure eyes. As for

Sir Aubrey Clavering, I think that he felt also uncomfortable: for he fidgetted on the seat and played with his handkerchief, his watch-chain, and his gloves.

"But what about Lady Maddox?" he asked: and methought it was by way of saying something in order to relieve himself from a conscious embarrassment. "Your lordship was speaking of Lady Maddox."

"Ah! by the bye, so I was!" exclaimed the nobleman. "The *Morning Post* says that Colonel O'Shaughnessey, on finding that her ladyship possessed no jointure of her own, and indeed was altogether without funds, suddenly abandoned her; and she wrote a most penitent letter to her husband, who of course took no notice of it. Ah! she is paying the penalty now for her unfaithfulness. Bitterly, bitterly will she rue the day that she fell! Lord Maddox has certainly got his revenge by the way her ladyship has been treated by her seducer: but in the first instance he was wrong, on discovering the intrigue, to create an explosion and so force his wife as it were into an elopement. He should have pretended not to see it—not to discover it: he should have allowed things to go on as they were; and by keeping his wife at home he could have had the finest revenge possible. Day by day could he have prosecuted such a vengeance—day after day could he have planted a fresh dagger in the heart of his guilty wife. *That* is the way for an outraged husband to be revenged!"

Again did my heart sink within me as I listened to this fearful tirade, every word of which I felt was uttered for a special purpose: and it was but too evident that each successive sentence struck the unhappy Lady Harlesdon as it were blow upon blow. Indeed, there was a moment when I saw she was so convulsed with inward grief that I really thought it would burst forth: for the workings of

her countenance and the strong compression of her lips proved how much it cost her to restrain her feelings.

"Well, Clavering, and what do *you* think of my views upon those delicate matters?" asked Lord Harlesdon, fixing a peculiar look upon the Baronet——"

"Oh! I can't say that I altogether agree with your lordship," was Clavering's reply, given hesitatingly and in a confused manner. "I think such revenge as your lordship speaks of is—is——But after all, I of course am no judge."

"No—you are not married *yet*," interrupted Lord Harlesdon: and at that instant I was absolutely stricken with terror at the look of demoniac malice which suddenly distorted his countenance: then immediately laughing as if to turn off the effect of this expression which he must have felt to have been upon his features, he added, "By the bye, when do you mean to marry, Clavering? A man of your fortune and rank can afford to make some pretty girl happy. Ah! talking of that, puts me in mind of something. Clementina, my dear," he continued, turning to his wife and catching her by the arm, so that she could not help turning half round in the carriage and looking him full in the face; "did I ever tell you that our gay and dashing friend here fought a duel last year with your cousin Eustace Quentin?"

"Ah! my lord," exclaimed Clavering, who I felt was literally writhing upon the seat: for he must have observed the mingled confusion, anguish, and terror which were expressed in Lady Harlesdon's countenance, as her husband, with eyes fixed upon that countenance, addressed her relative to the duel; "this is a matter which really ought not to be alluded to. I—I—must positively beg——"

"Oh, nonsense, Clavering!" exclaimed Lord Harlesdon: "what harm can there be in talking of a little adventure that is past? Besides, I fancied that you were on such terms of intimacy with us ——Why, if I mistake not, you knew her ladyship," cried the nobleman, interrupting himself, "before she was Lady Harlesdon—did you not?"

"I forget—I think—yes—I must have had that honour," stammered Sir Aubrey Clavering, while my poor mistress blushed and turned pale a dozen times in a minute.

"Oh! you can't have forgotten such a thing as that," exclaimed the nobleman with another malignant look. "But however, as I was saying, Clementina," he continued, still affecting a jocular tone and gay manner, which nevertheless were hollow beyond all possibility of mistake; "our friend Clavering here did actually and truly fight a duel with Eustace Quentin. But I think you are already aware of that circumstance? If I mistake not, Quentin himself told us about it when we met him at Dover after our return from the Continent? But the cause of that duel I am well assured you know nothing about, and have never yet heard."

"My lord," said Lady Harlesdon, now evidently mustering up all her presence of mind and all her courage to put a stop to a scene that was every instant growing more and more painful; "I do beseech you to change your conversation. Sir Aubrey Clavering is evidently distressed at mention being made of that dispute which he so unfortunately had with a relative of our's——"

"Our's!" ejaculated Lord Harlesdon: "Eustace is no relation of mine! Of *your's*, you mean."

"Well, my dear, is he not now a relation of your's also—at least by marriage?" asked Lady Harlesdon, assuming her most winning ways—looking most coaxingly and speaking most caressingly.

"Ah! then, by the mere fact of marriage," exclaimed Lord Harlesdon, "a husband is compelled to acknowledge all kith and kin pertaining to his wife, no matter of what sort or sex? Pretty babe! you are your mamma's darling," he immediately added, almost in the same breath, as he leant forward and patted Bella's cheek as she lay sleeping in my lap: "yes, you are mamma's darling—and of course mine also."

I gave a start as if a serpent had stung me: for it struck me in an instant that these last words relative to the child were a terribly significant sequence to the former remark concerning a husband's acknowledging his wife's kith and kin. Indeed, the allusion seemed to have a fearful meaning. I felt Sir Aubrey Clavering start almost as convulsively as I did; and I beheld an expression of wild terror spring up on the features of Lady Harlesdon, as with ghastly looks her eyes stared upon her husband. Oh! how I pitied her; for I saw that the punishment she was enduring was awful. I could no longer have any doubt but that it was *his* revenge which Lord Harlesdon was taking; and deeply, deeply did I deplore the accident which had made me acquainted with the secret and all the details of that guilty amour.

"Oh! but we were talking of the duel business," continued Lord Harlesdon, seeming to resume the subject quite in a leisurely sort of manner and as if unaware of the emotions which his episodical allusion to the sleeping Bella had produced. "Notwithstanding your frowns and signs, Clavering, I am determined to let it all out. Why, it is only by way of amusement!"—and he affected to laugh gaily. "Well then, you must know, my dear Clementina," he continued, once more turning half round in the carriage and fixing his eyes upon Lady Harlesdon, who was no doubt exerting every vital energy to maintain an air of composure,—"our friend Sir Aubrey went to stay with a family near Canterbury—towards the close of last year—and there he fell in love with a sweet pretty girl—the nursery-maid, I believe, in the family—just as Mary is in our's."

Here his lordship threw his eyes upon me; and the reader may suppose the confusion and misery which I was enduring as the nobleman, with cold-blooded cruelty, thus entered upon the details of the painful scene; and methought that in the glistening of his eyes and the workings of his countenance, I could discern the malicious delight with which he was thus playing and angling with the feelings of his wife and the Baronet. Yes—and of mine also; for he was now most unjustifiably dragging me into the whole proceeding.

"A very pretty girl indeed," he repeated; "and so graphically has the whole transaction been described to me, that I think I can even give you the complete portraiture of the fair cause of that duel. As a matter of course such a sketch carries with it a degree of interest peculiarly its own; because the heroine of a duel is invariably calculated to inspire feelings of curiosity. Listen then.

The young person in question would now be about eighteen years old—a little above the middle height—of a very excellent figure, and genteel almost to a lady-like appearance. Her hair very dark, with a bright gloss upon it—not coarse, but fine and silky: her eyes dark, also rather large, and what may be termed very handsome: her features regular, classic in profile, and somewhat delicate—not much colour upon the cheeks, except when the emotions are excited, and then no doubt the heroine of my story can blush the deepest crimson. She has a very pretty mouth—bright coral lips, and a set of teeth such as the daughter of a duchess might envy."

It would be impossible to find words to convey an adequate idea of all I felt as his lordship thus proceeded; and if I record every detail of his portraiture, it is from no feeling of vanity, but simply because from the very outset of this narrative I have resolved to chronicle the exact truth at all times, no matter how closely and intimately it may regard myself. But painful to a degree were my sensations as the malicious old man went on describing me; and deep indeed were the blushes that suffused my countenance as he so pointedly alluded to them. I hung down my head—bent as much over the sleeping child as I possibly could—and strove to the utmost to conceal my countenance. I know not therefore how Lady Harlesdon looked at the time—much less what was the aspect that Sir Aubrey Clavering wore: but judging by what I myself felt—I, who was innocent of any wrong—the tortures experienced by my poor mistress must have been excruciating to a degree—for she was guilty and she was jealous!

"Now," continued Lord Harlesdon, pitiless and implacable, "you have a pretty correct sketch of the young person whom Sir Aubrey fell in love with at Twisden Lodge: for that was the place, when I come to think of it, where the scene occurred. Don't you think, Clementina dear, that the girl was beautiful enough to inspire such a passion? Come, why do you not answer me? Do you object to have a joke at Sir Aubrey's expense?"

"I would much rather change the conversation," replied her ladyship, in a voice so woe-begone that I felt assured she must be experiencing mortal agonies.

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed his lordship: "it is as good a topic for conversation as any other. Clavering, your taste was certainly admirable; and no one can be surprised at your loving the girl dearly. But come, tell me the truth—is it really a fact that you are secretly engaged to her—that you intend to marry her shortly—and that in the interval you have contrived by some means to get her into a noble family, in order to pick up polished manners and all the gentilities of high life?"

"On my soul, my lord, it is all false!" exclaimed the Baronet, with much impetuosity, and seeming as if he were determined that the scene should be put an end to at any risk. "Whoever has told your lordship such a pack of nonsense, has grossly deceived you."

"Ah! it is all very well for you to treat the matter thus, my dear friend," interrupted Lord Harlesdon, affecting to take the Baronet's words and manner also with the most perfect good-humour: "but a little bird has whispered these things in my ears. Only conceive, my dear Clementina," he continued, again turning towards his wife, on whose burning brain he was thus heaping coals of fire,—"our friend Sir Aubrey here has managed to get this girl into a family where he himself visits. It is really too bad—is it not? But of course young men will be young men. By the bye, Mary," he suddenly exclaimed—and I started visibly as he thus called me by name; "if I mistake not, you were at Twisden Lodge, and I believe at about the same time this duel took place? Were you acquainted with the beautiful heroine of the adventure? and was she indeed as charming a creature as I have described?"

I did not raise my looks; nor did I even attempt to make any answer. I was overwhelmed with grief, confusion, and alarm; and as I bowed my eyes above the still sleeping child, my tears fell upon the little innocent's cheeks.

"Why, good heaven! the girl's crying," exclaimed Lord Harlesdon, whose eyes, sharpened by his malice to the keenest degree of visual power, at once observed those tears. "What on earth does it mean? Come, look up, girl! What are you crying for? Surely nothing has been said to provoke your grief—unless indeed you regret Twisden Lodge and the scenes which took place there."

But still I made no answer nor even raised my head: yet the tears fell thicker and faster from my eyes.

"See! you are crying all over this dear darling child," continued his lordship; and taking his handkerchief he wiped little Bella's face. "How calmly and beautifully she is sleeping! But do look, Clementina!" he exclaimed, addressing his wife: "just contemplate our darling child for a few moments, and you will really see a distant resemblance to some face that is familiar to us. Whose face can it be that the dear child thus reminds me of?"

I shuddered as I heard the vindictive old man thus speaking: for, as a matter of course, all the conversation to which I had listened on the preceding evening in the arbour recurred to my mind in every minute detail; and I felt assured that Morley the groom must have betrayed the whole to his lordship. Yes—I shuddered, because I felt how keenly, agonizingly, and excruciatingly my poor mistress must be writhing beneath the terrific laceration of her husband's revenge.

"I feel so ill—indeed, I seem as if I were about to faint," murmured Lady Harlesdon, in a low and feeble voice; and as I now raised my head suddenly, I observed that she had fallen back in the barouche, ghastly pale, and looking as if the hand of death were upon her.

"What! are you indeed ill?" exclaimed Lord Harlesdon.

"Yes—very. I feel—I feel—as if my senses were abandoning me:"—and Lady Harlesdon heaved a long sigh which was abruptly closed with a quick convulsive gasp.

"Well, here is old Johnson's farm-house close by. We will drive to it:"—then looking out of the carriage-window, Lord Harlesdon exclaimed, "Thomas, drive to Farmer Johnson's."

The order was obeyed; and in a couple of minutes the carriage dashed up to the front of a large farm

homestead forming the most prominent feature in a beautifully picturesque landscape. But little leisure or inclination had I to observe the attractions of the surrounding scenery; for my heart was full of grief, and the most painful thoughts were agitating in my brain. Lady Harlesdou was evidently very, very ill: and no wonder—for the ride had now continued upwards of an hour, during which space every minute had been fraught with some new agony —each successive moment had been marked with some fresh anguish! For *her*, poor lady! it must have been the same as dropping molten lead upon the brain laid bare; and if her guilt had been great, her punishment in this brief hour had been horrible.

Forth from the farm-house came Johnson, his wife, her old mother, two or three grown-up daughters, and likewise a couple of buxom rosy-checked dairy-maids, all anxious to demonstrate their respect towards my lord and her ladyship.

"My good friends," said the nobleman, "Lady Harlesdon has been suddenly taken unwell——"

His lordship had not time to finish his sentence ere the entire posse crowded about the carriage; and her ladyship, who was in a fainting state, was taken out by the females and conveyed with all possible tenderness and care into the farm-house. His lordship had already alighted, but had bade Sir Aubrey and myself remain in the carriage: and now, just as Lady Harlesdon was being borne to the house, he said in a loud voice, "I must get you, Sir Aubrey, to return with Mary to the Park. I shall remain here with her ladyship, who will require two or three hours' repose. Thomas," he cried, addressing himself to the coachman, "you will come back at four o'clock."

"For my part I would rather take a ramble on foot," observed Sir Aubrey: for Lady Harlesdon, startled into recovery as it were by her husband's words, had flung a wild look around, her acutest sensibilities being no doubt goaded to the quick at the idea of the Baronet riding home *alone* with me in the carriage.

"No indeed, I cannot think of it, Sir Aubrey," exclaimed Lord Harlesdon, with a grim smile of malice. "You *must* get back to the Park with Mary as soon as ever you can, in order to reassure every body that there is nothing dangerous in her ladyship's illness. Indeed, I ask it as a personal favour that you will go straight back. Now then, drive on!"

And before Sir Aubrey had time to utter another word of remonstrance, or I had recovered from the fresh confusion into which this new turn in the day's adventure had thrown me, the carriage rolled away; and there was I, alone inside the vehicle with the very man whom I both disliked and feared more than any other.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BARONET'S SUIT.

For some minutes a dead silence prevailed. I kept my looks bent down upon the sleeping child; and as my thoughts slowly settled themselves in the cells of my brain, I began to appreciate all the intense painfulness of that position in which I was now placed, and the first idea of which had filled me with confusion and dismay. All in a moment Sir Aubrey Clavering, who during that interval of several minutes had himself sat silent and motionless, shifted his position to the back seat, so that by this change he placed himself opposite to me.

"Mary," said he, "for heaven's sake tell me, if you can, what all this means? You *must* have perceived that there was something strange, unnatural, and even pointed to a degree in the conduct of Lord Harlesdon. Besides, he evidently knew full well that *you* were 'the young person,' as he called you, whose portrait he sketched."

Sir Aubrey paused for my answer: but I had none to give. What could I say? The reader is already aware of my motives for keeping silent relative to the incidents of the arbour on the preceding night; and anything in the shape of mere comment upon what had just passed, would be to encourage a sort of familiar conversation with the Baronet.

"Why will you not speak to me?" he asked in a tone that was evidently meant to be conciliatory and reassuring.

"I have nothing to say, sir," was my reply.

"Would you have me infer that it was you yourself who have been giving all the details of that precious business at Twisden Lodge——"

"What!" I exclaimed indignantly: "do you dare accuse me, sir, of such idle, boastful, ridiculous talk to Lord Harlesdon?"

"Well, if not to Lord Harlesdon, to your fellow-servants," rejoined Sir Aubrey; "and *they* have repeated the tittle-tattle."

"Sir, I am incapable of such conduct," was my indignant answer. "If you only knew how painful this scene has been to me——"

"Ah! I recollect—you cried!" interrupted Sir Aubrey. "But women are such precious deceivers, it is impossible to know when they are sincere or when they are shamming."

"Will you permit me to alight, and I will walk home?"—and I endeavoured to thrust my head out of the carriage-window to request the coachman to stop.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the Baronet. "We are at least seven or eight miles away from the Park, and you could not walk such a distance."

Thus speaking, he drew up the glasses.

"But I insist upon being suffered to alight," said I, with firm tone and manner.

"Then you shall do no such thing," he answered, with equal resoluteness. "Now don't make a fool of yourself, Mary, and play the prude: I am not going to hurt you—I will not lay a finger upon you, I declare! But perhaps you will consent to hear me patiently? Will you however keep secret what I am going to say, supposing that you refuse the offer I have to make?"

I gave no answer, but kept my eyes bent down so as to make Sir Aubrey understand that if I were compelled to listen to him it was altogether against my own inclination.

"I never did see such a provoking creature as you are," he continued, but not altogether with accents of spite. "I had vowed to hate and detest you after your conduct towards me at Twisden Lodge; but somehow or another your presence disarms me of all rancour. Really, when I look at you, Mary, you are not only the beautiful

girl that Lord Harlesdon described so graphically, yet with such malicious intent; but there is something about you so sweet, so charming, so fascinating, that one cannot help loving you. There! by that very blush which rises to your cheeks——"

"Is it worthy, sir, of the character of a British Officer thus to insult a defenceless female?" I cried, now unable to restrain my feelings any longer. "Her ladyship shall be informed of your conduct towards me."

"What do you mean by that threat?" he asked, fixing his eyes with a searching keenness upon me. "Have you any idea——But yes, you must have after all that has been taking place: and indeed, his lordship seemed to fancy that you were a confidant—else wherefore should he have sought to vent his spite upon *you*?"

Thus did Sir Aubrey continue to muse in an audible tone; and it was apparent enough what was passing in his mind. He fancied that the threat I had used had the vulgar meaning of an intent to excite Lady Harlesdon's jealousy, and that therefore I was acquainted with the secret of her amour with him.

"I mean, sir," was my answer so soon as I could collect my ideas, "that to my mistress do I look for protection, and to her shall I complain of any rudeness that may be offered to me by a guest or inmate of Harlesdon Park."

"Prettily but ambiguously expressed," he exclaimed. "The fact is, Mary, you are deeper than one would think. You have fathomed all this mystery; or perhaps indeed her ladyship has made you her confidant?—And yet that is not likely, considering that she is aware of the little matter at Twisden Lodge——"

"Remember, sir," I observed in a tone of rebuke, "that I am but a menial dependant; and perhaps you will believe me when I declare that I cherish no impertinent curiosity relative to the affairs of my master or mistress."

"Well, upon that subject we will say no more," observed the Baronet. "A great deal too much perhaps has been said already; and I am so heartily sick of the thing that come what will and happen what may, I shall take my departure to-night or to-morrow from the Park. Now, such being my resolution, will you listen to me for a few moments? I am sorry that it is an offence to tell you that you are beautiful; because it is really a hard thing not to be allowed to speak the truth. That however *is* the truth; and I must reiterate it at the risk of angering you. This declaration I make to explain my feelings towards you—which are those of a very sincere affection. From the first moment that we met I loved you; and your image has often and often stolen into my mind even when no circumstance seemed to be conjuring it up. I should like to have it in my power to place you in a brilliant and prosperous condition—give you a fine house of your own in London—a carriage—servants——"

"Silence, sir, I command you!" was now my indignant, I might almost say enraged exclamation: and if he had even been suffered to proceed so far in his address, it was that at first my feelings overcame me to such an extent as to render it doubtful whether they were to explode in a flood of tears or an outbreak of indignation. In this latter did they now find vent; and as I spoke I lowered one of the glasses ere the Baronet could raise a hand to prevent me.

"For God's sake create no noise!" he exclaimed, all in a moment becoming seriously alarmed. "I will not say another word."

"And I will not proceed any further in your company," was my quick and determined response.

"Then I will alight," he said—but not with a manner as if he were serious: "unless indeed you will believe my solemn pledge——"

"No, sir—I insist upon the carriage being stopped!"—and I held my hand over the glass that was lowered in order to prevent him from suddenly raising it again.

"One word—one single word, Mary!"

"No—not a word! I am resolved!"—and thrusting forth my head, I desired the coachman to stop.

He reined in his horses at once—the footman got down from behind—the door was opened—and I stepped out. Sir Aubrey Clavering said not a word; but the footman looked at me as if he half-suspected the real truth. Indeed there must have been a certain degree of excitement in my look and manner but too well calculated to convey the impression that I was annoyed and had experienced insult. The carriage had stopped just at the corner of a lane branching off from the main road that intersected the estate; and into that shady avenue did I at once turn,—the barouche immediately rolling away again. But in two or three minutes it struck me that I heard a voice call out "Stop!" and at the same moment the retreating sounds of the equipage ceased. I fancied that Sir Aubrey had decided upon alighting and would perhaps follow me. I accordingly hurried onward up the lane as quickly as I could, considering that I had a heavy child in my arms. At length, nearly exhausted, I sat down upon a bank; and there the pent-up feelings of excitement which I had experienced found an issue in tears.

There was however relief in this flow of sorrow; and wiping my eyes, I was preparing to resume my walk and take the shortest cut across the fields back to the Park, when some one suddenly burst through the hedge fringing the bank where I was seated—and Sir Aubrey Clavering stood before me! I screamed with affright: and then dismay fastened itself upon me, as I beheld the strange wild look which was expressed on his countenance. His features had become very pale—his under-lip was quivering with excitement—and in his eyes might be read the settled purpose of one who had suddenly made up his mind to some bold or desperate resolve.

"Mary, do not be afraid," he said. "I take God to witness that I will not harm you! As a man and as a gentleman——But no, I will not take that oath, for I am not master of myself! I love you, Mary; by the heaven above us, I love you! This feeling which I have for you, makes me wretched—yes, wretched beyond all description: and God only knows whether it can ever make me happy!"

"Sir Aubrey Clavering," I said, frightened by his wild looks and excited manner, "I beseech and implore that you will leave me."

"No—I have resolved upon the course I shall pursue," he said: and he literally quivered all over with the strength of his feelings. "When you left me a few minutes back, I said to myself

Let the prude go. I was a fool ever to bestow a serious thought upon her!—But there was a sentiment in my heart which belied the flippant levity of my words. That sentiment became all in a moment stronger than myself. Had my life depended on the issue I could not have resisted it. I accordingly stopped the carriage—made some excuse for alighting and sending it home empty—then cut across the fields to overtake you: and here I am to propose anything or everything! Yes, Mary—I am almost mad; and yet there is a desperate calmness in my soul. I will marry you—I offer you my hand, here in the presence of heaven! If you consent——"

"No, no—I cannot, I dare not!" was my faultering answer: for the reader may probably imagine how startled and surprised I was at the offer. "If you really have any esteem for me you will leave me at once."

"Mary, I cannot leave you yet: I will not—it is impossible!"—and his looks grew wilder as he spoke. "*You* are not serious in refusing me: but you think that *I* shall not fulfil my promise. As God is my witness I will! You have inspired my soul with feelings which have interwoven themselves as it were with my entire being. I love you madly—passionately—furiously!"

"And Lady Harlesdon?" I exclaimed, scarcely knowing what I said, but meaning to silence him with a rebuke.

"Oh! that has been the dream of my youth!" he cried: "but baseless as such dreams always are. Well, since you know that secret then,—— and after all you have seen and heard this morning you could not help discovering it, even if it were unknown to you before,——I will frankly confess that I *have* loved her, and that I pity and compassionate her *now!* But the love which I experienced for her was nothing—no, nothing in comparison with this passion which I feel for you! I tell you, Mary, I love you strongly—aye, even fiercely and furiously! I could take you in my arms and press you to my heart with such violence as even to hurt you. Indeed, it is a maddening, raging passion with which you have inspired me. Say then, will you be mine? will you become the sharer of my rank and fortune? Your answer I must have now—this minute. I can brook no delay!"

The torrent of excited words to which he thus gave vent with vehement and impassioned utterance, alarmed and well nigh overwhelmed me. I feared lest he should do me a mischief; and yet not even for the sake of getting rid of him, would I condescend to an untruth. No—not for worlds would I have encouraged a hope which I never meant to fulfil. I therefore exerted all my energies to arm myself with the fortitude sufficient for a final and positive answer.

"Sir Aubrey Clavering," said I, "wherefore compel me to repeat what I have already said? You have made me an honourable offer, which, considering *your* exalted position and *my* humble state, has certainly atoned for much of your former ill-conduct towards me. But while acknowledging the honour thus conferred upon me, I must beg of you as an officer and a gentleman——"

"No, no—do not refuse me, Mary," he interrupted, with the most passionate vehemence. "I will not take a refusal!"—and seizing me by the wrist he grasped me as it were in an iron vice, causing me the acutest pain.

"Sir Aubrey, you have hurt me!" I said, with a tone and manner of mild but dignified rebuke.

"Hurt you?" he echoed, the words hissing between his set teeth, and his eyes suddenly flaming with rage: "I told you that I was not the master of myself. By heaven! I shall do you a mischief yet."

"For God's sake leave me—let me go!" I exclaimed, now cruelly frightened.

"Say then—will you be mine?" he demanded in a voice hoarse with passion. "My pride as well as my love is now concerned!"—and still he retained my wrist in his gripe.

"Ah, sir! is this manly—is this gentlemanly on your part?" I asked, shrinking, and even cowering beneath the flaming fury of his eyes. "If you hurt me you may hurt the child——Oh! sir, have mercy upon me for the sake of this dear child!"—and I looked up with a significant remonstrance into his countenance.

"Tell me, Mary," he exclaimed, heedless of my appeal, "wherefore do you refuse me? Is it because you love another? If so, say who he is! I am determined to know the secret—I will force and compel you to reveal it——Ah! by that sudden blush which has mantled upon your cheek, my suspicion is correct! Tell me then who he is? I will know—I insist upon knowing," he exclaimed with alarming wildness.

I answered not, but sat upon the bank gazing in mingled terror and confusion up into his face, while Miss Bella began to cry.

"Ah! a sudden thought strikes me!" exclaimed Sir Aubrey: "I understand it all. You love that baby-faced Eustace? But I swear that you shall be mine!"—and he again pressed my wrist so forcibly that I screamed out with the pain.

At this moment the quick clatter of a horse's hoofs reached our ears; and the next instant did the approaching horseman make his appearance round a bend in the lane. An exclamation of mingled astonishment and anger burst from his lips, while at the same time a joyous cry of recognition thrilled from mine: and as he sprang from his steed, Sir Aubrey Clavering muttered in a deep tone of concentrated rage, "Ah, Eustace Quentin!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE AVOWAL.

Yes: the Hon. Eustace Quentin it was—and at a glance might he perceive that I hailed his presence with delight. Sir Aubrey, instantaneously relinquishing my hand, folded his arms and stood with a mien of haughty defiance, as rising up from the bank I advanced a pace or two towards Mr. Quentin.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "But I understand it all! Miss Price, Sir Aubrey Clavering has been again insulting you——"

I was now suddenly seized with confusion: I felt the colour rush to my cheeks—and I knew not how to reply.

"She cannot say that I have insulted her!" Sir Aubrey Clavering now observed—and he spoke in a deep voice. "I have offered her my hand—I have made honourable proposals to her—and she has refused them. At this moment I hate her as much as just now I loved her!"

"It is infamous of you thus to speak of a young and innocent female who can have done you no harm," exclaimed Eustace Quentin, his cheeks colouring with indignation and his eyes flashing fire, as he advanced close up to the Baronet.

"Look you, my good fellow," said the latter in a strange tone; "we have fought once on her account, and we will fight no more. It is unnecessary! for it was only within the last few minutes that I found she loved another: and that other is ——But no, I need not name him! Suffice it for me to add that both herself and he shall henceforth be the objects of my implacable revenge."

With these words, which struck like a hammer upon my brain, Sir Aubrey Clavering turned abruptly on his heel and walked away in the direction of the main road. Covered with confusion, and well nigh overwhelmed with the varied feelings (which were not however *all* painful) that agitated within me, I had sunk down upon the bank again, and bending over the child, thus concealed my blushing, burning countenance from Eustace Quentin. In a few moments he placed himself by my side, and in a low tremulous voice, said, "Mary, you heard the closing remarks which Sir Aubrey Clavering made? From *your* lips, then, as he doubtless received the assurance that you love another?"

"No, sir—no!" I exclaimed, almost impetuously.

"But is it so?" he asked, his voice trembling still more than at first. "I thought—indeed I hoped that I understood the Baronet's allusion. In a word, Mary, I took it for myself."

I spoke not a syllable, and still kept my face so bent over little Bella that he could not catch the slightest glimpse of my features: for I was both blushing and weeping, and ineffable sensations were making my heart flutter and beat audibly.

"You do not give me any answer," he said, an unspeakable tenderness in his voice. "Ah! Mary, I could be content to become the object of Clavering's implacable vengeance so long as I was also the object of your love!"

As these words fell upon my ears, I started—I almost shrieked out: for there was something so intense in the pleasure I felt at the moment that the effect was like a thrilling pain. Then I grew intoxicated with a sense of bliss such as I had never known before: but I neither raised my eyes nor spoke a word. My lips were sealed by the ineffable feelings that had taken possession of me; and not for worlds at that moment could I have dared to look up into his countenance.

He took my hand—and I did not withdraw it. Why should I? I felt that I loved him! All the emotions and feelings that I ever before experienced when thinking of him, were now explained. Yes—I did love him: and perhaps that moment when I thus received the assurance that he loved me in return, was the sweetest and the happiest of my life. Ah! if I had *then* known all that I was destined to endure on account of this love of mine—of our's——the woes, the sorrows——But I am anticipating!

"Mary," resumed Quentin, after a long pause, during which he still retained my hand in his own, "the circumstances that have just occurred induce me to make a revelation which perhaps I should not have done yet awhile—the revelation that I love you. Yes—listen to me, dearest girl, and hear all I have to say. From the very first moment that we ever met, did you make the most favourable impression upon my heart; and I knew that there was indeed such a thing as love at first sight! I loved you for many reasons—not only because you are beautiful, but because your countenance reflects all the amiable qualities of your heart. Do you remember our conversation on the beach at Dover? Your conduct on that occasion filled me with admiration, and confirmed the love which I had already conceived for you. I saw that your soul was purity itself, and that the chastest sense of duty rose superior to every other consideration. Therefore was it that I did not attempt to detain you when you quitted me so abruptly. No: for I was not *then* prepared to take so solemn and serious a step as to say that I loved you; and in none save honourable terms should I have dared address you. I would have perished first! It was this same respectful feeling which prevented me from making any endeavour to see you again while you were at Dover. Were you my own sister, I could not have been more jealous of your reputation! I knew that you entered the service of Lady Harlesdon——"

"And I have for some time known that you, Mr. Quentin," said I, "generously interested yourself to procure me this situation."

"Ah! you discovered *that?*" he exclaimed. "Then you know also that Lady Harlesdon is my cousin?"

"I know it," was my answer: but still I raised not my head. "I had however been several months in her ladyship's service ere I ascertained to whom I was indebted——"

"And then," he interrupted me quickly, "were you pleased? were you gratified? did you experience satisfaction on learning what I had done for you, and how I had done it?"

"I felt the deepest, deepest gratitude," was my answer: but my voice was so tremulous as to be scarcely audible. "And this gratitude was all the more profound in consequence of the delicate manner in which you interested yourself on my behalf."

"Did it ever strike you, Mary—did you ever think that I entertained for you a feeling superior to a common interest? Oh! I do not ask for any other motive," he exclaimed, "than to learn whether the feeling with which you inspired me from the first, has been in any way reciprocated. In a word, tell me, Mary—dearest Mary—do you love me?"

I pressed his hand gently—for no verbal reply could I give.

"Oh, then you do love me! Yes—you love me!" he exclaimed in a tone of thrilling enthusiasm; and throwing his arm round my neck, he with tender compulsion *forced* me to look up. "Now Mary," he cried, as my blushing countenance was upraised towards his own, and I felt that my eyes were reflecting the love that shone in his; "say that you love me?"

"I do," was the answer which my lips softly breathed: and then with an enthusiastic rapture Eustace imprinted a kiss upon my forehead.

"O Mr. Quentin!" I said, now suddenly awakening from that dream of bliss and disengaging myself from his arms; "you have not well considered—you cannot have maturely weighed and reflected——"

"Do not distrust my faith," he cried; "because that would be to doubt my love!"

"O sir! but you are so young—we are both so young—so very, very young!" I exclaimed.

"I am twenty, dearest Mary," he rejoined; "and in another year shall be my own master."

"Mr. Quentin," I said, now speaking very seriously, "I am afraid that I have been guilty of a piece of unpardonable weakness. I should have reflected upon the immeasurable distance between you and me——"

"And would to God that I were more highly placed," he cried, with all the generosity of his youthful enthusiasm, "so that I might elevate you in proportion: for you deserve all and everything that the tenderest love and the sincerest admiration can possibly accomplish for you!"

"Oh, you well nigh overwhelm me with your goodness—your kindness!" I exclaimed, my heart fluttering with indescribable sensations. "But never, never, would I take advantage of this frank and ingenuous conduct on your part. Sooner would I remain the poorest, the humblest, and the obscurest of beings, than by rising to a rank equal to your own, make you regret that you ever rendered me the partaker of your honours! Oh, Mr. Quentin, I have read enough concerning unequal marriages to make me tremble—— But never shall it be said in your family that you married a low vulgar girl! Therefore," I exclaimed, with tears in my eyes, but speaking vehemently, "let everything which has just taken place be forgotten."

"Ah! then you do not love me? No, no—you do not love me!" exclaimed Quentin, in words more passionate than my own.

"I do, I do," were the exclamations that burst from my lips, while the tears ran down my cheeks: "and it is because I love you thus sincerely that I would not for worlds be the cause of your unhappiness."

"My only idea of happiness is now centred in you, Mary," responded Eustace; "and if you recall your own avowal of affection you will render me the most miserable of men. Ah! every word you speak endears you more and more completely to me: every syllable to which you have been giving utterance convinces me that you possess the noblest of hearts, the most elevated of characters. What! shall I resign such a treasure as thou art? No, no, my beloved Mary, I cannot consent to such a sacrifice. And, Oh! when I bethink me in the hurry and bewilderment of my ideas, Sir Aubrey Clavering declared he had solemnly offered you his hand, but you refused because you loved another—and that other, it is I—it is I!" he exclaimed more exultingly than ever. "Then, if you have rejected the proposals of a wealthy man, decorated with a title, and who being his own master could at once make you his wife, you are indeed consummating a far greater sacrifice on my account than ever I can possibly make on your's. Hear me then, Mary—hear me solemnly and sacredly proclaim in the face of heaven—in the presence of that sun which is God's own glorious lamp, penetrating everything with its light, even as the All-seeing eye can read deep down into the secrets of every heart,—hear me, I say, declare that you only do I love—you alone will I ever love!"

"Pause—reflect, I beseech you, Mr. Quentin," I exclaimed, terrified at the solemnity of the act which he was accomplishing. "Take some little time at least to consider all this."

"No—not a minute!" he answered vehemently. "Besides, if I register in heaven these solemn vows to you, Mary, you will give me a promise equally sacred in return?"

"Then listen," I exclaimed, my own presence of mind returning in proportion as he was carried away by the strong tide of his enthusiasm. "You said ere now that in another year you will be your own master. Take that year to reflect well upon the course you will adopt towards me. Let everything continue in abeyance—let us stand with regard to each other precisely as if all which we have been saying had remained unsaid. Indeed, let there be no communion nor correspondence between us of any kind; and if at the expiration of the interval you *still* entertain such flattering opinions relative to me, I shall gratefully and cheerfully receive the announcement. But if, on the other hand,"—and here I felt my voice faltering notwithstanding all my efforts to maintain my firmness,—"you should find that this passion was more transitory than in your sincerity you now imagine it to be—if in a word you experience at the year's end the least regret that the scene of this day should ever have occurred,—then shall I accept the award with resignation. Consider yourself, therefore, Mr. Quentin, under no binding promise to me. I release you from those vows which you have so rashly made——"

"Rashly? no, no!" he exclaimed, once more seizing my hand and pressing it between both his own. "To-morrow—a week hence—a month hence—or a year hence, shall I be prepared to reiterate the same!"

"Yes—a year hence," I echoed emphatically. "Let it be so."

"And you will plight me no pledges now?" he cried entreatingly.

"No—not one!" was my firm response. "Mr. Quentin, if I ever become your wife,"—and my heart thrilled with indescribable emotions as I gave utterance to the word,—"it shall be only when you have passed the period of your minority, after a sufficiently long interval for you thoroughly to examine into the state of your heart, and under such circumstances that there never shall be any opportunity for your relatives to say that you have been inveigled into a foolish marriage by a self-interested, intriguing young woman. In a word, for *my* sake as much as for your own, do I insist upon this delay of one whole year ere any promises or vows be interchanged."

I spoke with a calm dignity: for I felt that I was performing a duty. May I be acquitted of vanity or conceit if I declare that I rose above the servility of a dependent position, and spoke out with the proudest feelings of a woman? At the same time I urged my plan with an affectionate respectfulness

which showed that while I did not forget the social distinction which still existed between us, yet I was neither prude nor hypocrite enough to conceal the genuine and chaste love with which he had inspired me.

"Admirable girl!" he exclaimed: "the more I see of you the more must I estimate the loftiness of your feelings and the excellence of your principles. For your sake then, Mary, do I consent to everything you have proposed. But think not for a single moment that my love will cool through absence or delay! No—because, if before to-day I loved you well, how much has your present conduct tended to increase my affection! You have behaved in a manner becoming all the noblest attributes of your sex. Nor will the memory of this day ever be effaced from my mind. To me it will be the pearl of days—the brightest of recollections! One thing however I must implore of you—and that is to consent that we shall correspond?"

"No, Mr. Quentin," I at once answered, firmly resolved to adhere to my purpose. "I appeal to the affection which you have professed towards me, to carry out my views to the fullest extent. When we part now, let us not see each other again for one whole year."

"Ah! this is too harsh, Mary," he cried, pressing my hand tenderly.

"Think you that I make no sacrifice of my own feelings?" said I in a tremulous tone. "Yes, yes—I do: and it is like forcing nature to act as I am acting at present! But inasmuch as I am resolved that no member of your family shall ever have to reproach me for word or deed of mine towards you during your minority and while you are still dependent on your parents, it is absolutely necessary that all intercourse should cease between us until the day when you become your own master. Tell me when that day will be: and *then*," I added in a faltering and tremulous voice, "I shall expect to receive a letter from you."

"On the 1st of November, 1829, shall I be of age," replied Eustace: "and instead of your receiving a letter from me on that day, you shall behold me in person coming to throw myself at your feet and demand your hand."

"If I am not still with Lady Harlesdon," said I, almost overpowered by the ineffable feelings that were agitating within, "I shall be at Ashford: and if on the 1st of November next year, I do not behold you in person, I shall repair to the post-office to ask if there be a letter for me. I need not tell you that if you come not, I shall at least expect you to write: because should everything else be at an end between us, I should like to receive a line—just one line—to say that I have not lost your esteem."

As I gave utterance to these last words, it seemed as if a strong tide of feeling surged up into my very throat. I gasped with powerful emotions, and averting my countenance melted into tears, which poured freely down my cheeks.

"Mary, dear Mary, in order that you may entertain the fullest conviction of my love and fidelity," said Eustace, gently placing his arm round my waist, "I will give you every present proof of my devotedness by assenting to all you stipulate. And it is likewise because I could not for worlds oppose another word of remonstrance against all the noble arguments and prudential reasons which you advance for complete separation and silence during the year—it is, I say, because you are too sublime in your woman's strength, too elevated in your feminine purity, for me to move you from your purpose, that I agree to all that has been proposed. I should, however, observe that my regiment has just been ordered to Derby. We only arrived there yesterday; and to-day I obtained leave to gallop across to Harlesdon Park, where I intended to stay a week. My servant will come round by Belper in the branch-coach with my portmanteau——May I not remain this one short week?"

I turned my tearful eyes reproachfully upon him, saying, "What? and for us to meet again during this week, and for me, perhaps, to have to repeat all my arguments over again?"

"Mary, dearest Mary!" he exclaimed, "you shall be obeyed in all things! I love you too well, too devotedly, not to fulfil your wishes to the utmost; and those wishes are too noble, and fraught with too sublime a generosity, not to command my respect. Well then, when my servant comes to-night, I will allege as an excuse that he has brought me an order from my commanding officer to rejoin at once; and to-morrow morning at day-break will I be off again. Are you satisfied, my Mary?"

"Yes, perfectly: how can I be otherwise?" said I. "But now let us separate."

"One word!" he cried: "for you have not as yet told me how you came to be subjected to the persecutions of Clavering at the instant when I made my appearance. Fortunate enough it was that I took the bye-roads!'

"The explanations you seek are given in a few moments," said I. "I accompanied my lord and her ladyship for an airing in the carriage; Sir Aubrey Clavering was with us. Her ladyship was taken very unwell, and my lord thought it necessary that she should have a few hour's rest at the farm yonder. He accordingly remained there with her ladyship, insisting that Sir Aubrey Clavering and I should return to the Park. Sir Aubrey addressed me in terms which compelled me to alight. Shortly afterwards he followed me, and——You know the rest."

"Dearest Mary," exclaimed Eustace, "I do indeed know from his own lips that he offered you his hand and that you refused. Ah! dearest, the tenderest love, the most unchanging affection on my part shall be your reward! But now which way are you going? Recollecting this neighbourhood well, methinks it must be at least three or four miles from Harlesdon Park; and you cannot walk that distance, particularly with little Bella there."

"I shall return to the farm beyond the trees," said I, pointing towards Mr. Johnson's homestead, "and wait till the arrival of the carriage, which his lordship ordered for four o'clock."

"And it is now one o'clock," observed Eustace, consulting his watch. "It is decided then, Mary, that we separate for an entire year? But what," he suddenly exclaimed, "if Sir Aubrey Clavering should renew his addresses—make them the subject of persecution, or any way endeavour to carry out his threat of vengeance against you?"

"Surely her ladyship will protect me against injury at his hands," said I; "and as for a renewal of his addresses, I shall know full well how to repeat the refusal which I have given him this day. From what he said I do not think he will remain at the Park any longer. But if you should meet him presently," I added, hesitatingly and tremulously, "do not, I beseech you, allow him to provoke you with angry words or taunts."

"There is no fear of that, dearest Mary," replied Quentin, his eyes swimming with delight at the interest which I thus manifested on his behalf. "As a gentleman he will veil his feelings, whatever they may be, before my cousin and Lord Harlesdon: nor is there the slightest chance that he would so far forget all rules of propriety and decency as to make any attempt to provoke me to another duel. Fear nothing then on that account."

Thus speaking, Eustace drew me towards him—strained me in his arms—and pressed his lips to mine. I have no reason to state that I resisted him: on the contrary, as we had agreed to separate, I felt that there was no harm in this parting embrace.

"Adieu, dearest Mary," he said in a voice of the deepest emotion.

"Farewell, Mr. Quentin," I answered, equally overpowered by my feelings.

"No—we shall not separate thus!" he exclaimed. "Let there not be the slightest shade of coldness in our farewell. Call me not then by the formal name of Mr. Quentin: address your last words to me as *Eustace*—your own devoted Eustace!"

"Farewell, Eustace," said I: and again he pressed me in his arms.

The next moment I snatched up little Bella from the bank, where I had placed her on the thick shawl in which she was wrapped; and with one parting glance of tenderness upon Eustace Quentin, I hurried away along the lane. Once more did I turn on reaching the bend a little way ahead, and he waved his handkerchief in token of farewell. I then hurried on—and the next moment we were no longer in sight of each other!

CHAPTER XXV.

A WIFE'S ANGUISH.

On regaining the main road, I sped as quickly as I could in the direction of Farmer Johnson's house: but so overpowered was I by the feelings that were excited in my heart by the incidents of the last hour, that I was compelled to seat myself at the foot of a tree and rest a while ere I resumed my walk. It seemed as if that one short hour had produced an event which was to exercise the most important influence over my destinies. At eighteen years of age did I love tenderly, and had every reason to believe that I was loved as fondly in return. But the longer I reflected on the course I had adopted, the more was I satisfied with myself. I knew that I had done my duty, and whatever might happen hereafter, no blame could be thrown upon me, nor could I have to regret my own actions. This approval of conscience had a great effect in tending to sooth and calm my agitated feelings, rendering my happiness more real and more serene, and mitigating the pain of separation.

A long year now lay before me—a year which I could not expect to remain free from much suspense, many hopes, and no doubt as many misgivings! I was not of a sanguine disposition: the misfortunes of my life had sobered down the enthusiasm of youthful ardour and clipped the wings of fancy's vivid imaginings. Therefore, though I now loved and felt that I was beloved, yet the ensuing year was not likely to be an unbroken dream of roseate bliss for me: and indeed it seemed repugnant to all the experiences of human nature to say that I should *not* look forward with much anxiety to the 1st of November, 1829. Yes, that day had now become the goal on which my eyes must remain fixed while traversing the vista of an entire year: it must prove one of those land-marks in my life's journey which would either have a garden of paradise or a cheerless desert beyond.

While seated at the foot of the tree and thus giving way to my reflections, I quite forgot everything concerning Lord and Lady Harlesdon, Sir Aubrey Clavering, and the menacing aspect which affairs had taken during the ride out in the barouche. But when I resumed my walk towards Farmer Johnson's, I began to recollect the various particulars of that painful scene which has already been described; and the longer I thought upon the subject, the more did I become perplexed to conjecture what would be the end. From the terrible malignity which Lord Harlesdon had displayed, I was apprehensive that his revenge would not be confined to mere sarcasm and taunt, or to the provocation of his wife's jealousy by playing me off against her with Clavering: for that such had been his object, especially in ordering me home *alone* with Sir Aubrey in the carriage, it was but too easy to understand.

On arriving within a hundred yards of Farmer Johnson's, I was actually struck with amazement on beholding Lord and Lady Harlesdon walking together arm-in-arm on the bank of the Derwent, which rolled its silver tide close by the homestead. They were equally astonished on perceiving me; and Lady Harlesdon at once exclaimed, "Why Mary! what has happened? how is it that you have not returned home?"

I looked up at her and perceived that an air of intense anxiety, as if she more than half suspected what *had* happened, was upon her pale and altered features: for so colourless and changed had her countenance become within the last two or three hours, that one would have thought her ladyship had only just risen from a bed of sickness. A sidelong glance, flung furtively upon Lord Harlesdon, showed me that he was neither restored to his wonted equanimity, nor had he made his peace with her. Indeed, it struck me the moment I thus gazed upon them, that during their ramble the old husband had been prosecuting his revenge upon his young wife after his own fashion and according to his own peculiar way, as described by himself ere now in the carriage.

"Please your ladyship," I said, in answer to her question, "I have not been home because I deemed it prudent to alight from the barouche."

"Ho! ho!" ejaculated Lord Harlesdon, flinging a bitter look of mocking triumph upon his wife. "I suppose the gallant Clavering——"

"Hush, my lord!" cried Lady Harlesdon, assuming all her dignity. "You must be careful how you speak in the presence of this young girl. Mary, go on to the farm—Bella will require some food—and you yourself must want refreshments."

"Stop, stop a moment!" exclaimed Lord Harlesdon, in that commanding voice which showed that he was determined to be obeyed. "Mary, be so kind as to explain why you descended from the carriage."

"To her ladyship, my lord, when alone with her, will I explain everything," was my answer, given with modest firmness.

"Hey-dey! my very servants now are to rebuke me, I suppose!" he exclaimed with more sarcasm than anger. "Mary, I insist——What, you are moving off?——Come back this moment, I say—come back, I command you!"

But heedless of his lordship's ejaculations, I hurried onward to the farm-house, where I was shown to a parlour and refeshments were served up for myself and Miss Isabella Clementina. In about half-an-hour Lady Harlesdon came into the room; and I must confess that I was considerably relieved on observing that she was not accompanied by her husband.

"No—his lordship is in the garden," she said, at once understanding the hasty look I had flung towards the door. "He has granted me a respite till the carriage comes:"—and throwing herself upon a chair, my unhappy mistress burst into an agony of tears.

I was deeply moved, but as a matter of course said nothing.

"Mary," observed her ladyship, after a long pause, during which she wept with exceeding bitterness, and from which violent outburst of grief it was not very easy to recover: "tell me—tell me without reserve—wherefore you quitted the carriage."

"Your ladyship must comprehend how painful—how very, very painful," said I, "it is for me to have aught to say on such a subject."

"But you *must* tell me everything, my dear girl," exclaimed Lady Harlesdon. "Say, did Sir Aubrey Clavering behave himself unbecomingly towards you?"

"He did, my lady," was my answer, delivered with infinite sorrow: and yet not for worlds could I tell a falsehood.

"The villain!" she muttered between her teeth: and her looks were now ghastly.

"O my dear lady!" I exclaimed, throwing myself on my knees before her, for Bella was asleep on the sofa; "it cuts me to the quick to be thus compelled to enhance the sorrow which you already experience!"

"Ah! then you have discovered that my soul cherishes a sorrow?" said Lady Harlesdon, in a strange tone of mingled wildness and mournfulness. "But, of course, you have. Young, inexperienced, and innocent though you are, you nevertheless could not have failed to understand all the bitter malignity, the fearful vindictiveness, and the pointed allusions in which Lord Harlesdon indulged this forenoon. Rise, Mary, from your knees: you have no pardon to ask of me. But you are a good girl for entertaining this sympathy towards your guilty mistress—yet not more guilty than she is unhappy."

I rose up accordingly, and stood before her, gazing with profound sorrow upon that beauteous creature, whose loveliness I saw full well would soon be as complete a wreck as her virtue long had been, and as her reputation in the great world would no doubt become; and the tears rolled down my cheeks as my heart was smitten with the direst woe on her account.

"Yes, Mary," she resumed, after another long pause, "I have been guilty; but I am unhappy—God knows how unhappy! You must be aware how deeply, fondly, devotedly I have loved Clavering to have risked so much on his account; and now, how does he repay me? At the very moment when he perceives that Lord Harlesdon, by some unaccountable means or another, has obtained an insight into all—yes, *all*—and when my heart is enduring ineffable excruciations after being lashed with the scourges of a husband's tremendous satire, —at such a time is it that Clavering forgets *me* and dares to offer his homage to *another!* Mary, dear Mary, not for an instant do I blame you. I am not angry with you—I am well assured that from *you* he would receive naught but repulse and reproach. But that he should have behaved thus, cuts me to the very quick! Heaven only knows what will be the end of all this. I cannot see where or how my husband's vengeance is to terminate."

She paused—wrung her hands bitterly—and then rising from her chair, began pacing the room in an awful state of fevered excitement. In a few minutes she grew more composed; and when she resumed her seat, I observed "that the Hon. Eustace Quentin had ridden on to the Park."

"Ah! Eustace has arrived?" she exclaimed, suddenly looking very hard at me; and I felt myself blushing deeply. "Did you see him? or did you merely hear of it?"

"I saw him, my lady," was my answer: and still I continued blushing—for love has its shame, although pure and innocent.

"Then he doubtless stopped and spoke to you?" said Lady Harlesdon: and when I had replied in the affirmative, she observed, "Perhaps you are aware that it was through his indirect instrumentality you entered my service? Ah! I see by your manner, Mary," she continued with a faint and sickly smile, "that you *are* acquainted with that little secret. But for heaven's sake, my dear girl, do not give way to ridiculous hopes or vain delusions! You are so good, so amiable, and so kind-hearted, that it would grieve me sadly to think that you incurred the chance of experiencing blighted hopes or ruined expectations. I am sure Eustace would encourage none, because he himself is the very soul of honour; and it was through the purest and sincerest motives of friendship that he interested himself on your behalf. You see, my dear Mary, that even amidst my own bitter, bitter afflictions I can afford a thought for you, because I love you. And ah! these afflictions of mine—they are indeed most grave, most terrible!" she added, her thoughts again reverting to her own circumstances.

I walked to the window, and looked out, in reality to conceal the confusion which I experienced on account of Lady Harlesdon's remarks; and now it struck me, that after all that had occurred I stood in a very different light with regard to the incident of the arbour. It was no doubt of the utmost consequence to Lady Harlesdon to know who her secret enemy was, and to ascertain exactly to what extent she was compromised with her husband. She manifested so much kindness, gentleness, and consideration towards me, even in the turmoil of her own dire afflictions, that I felt I no longer ought to conceal so important a secret from her ladyship. My mind was speedily made up; and advancing towards her, I said, "My lady, I have something of the utmost consequence to tell you." She suddenly looked up at me in astonishment; and I immediately added, "Yes, something that will afford a key to the reading of much that must at present be involved in the deepest mystery to your vision."

"In heaven's name what mean you?" she exclaimed; then taking my hand, and making me sit down beside her, she said, "Now speak frankly and without reserve, as you ever do."

I thereupon proceeded to tell her ladyship everything connected with the arbour, not even excepting the proposals which John Morley had made to me relative to "comparing notes, pulling together, and rowing in the same boat." Her ladyship listened, from first to last, without speaking a single word—almost without a gesture, but with consternation and dismay in her looks. For some minutes after I had finished she still remained motionless as a statue, gazing upon me with a sort of wonderment, as if she were confounded.

"Then I am lost—utterly, utterly lost!" she at length said, in a voice so low, so deep, so altered by despair, that it seemed impossible to come from that throat which was wont to pour forth the most fluid tones. "Yes, all is intelligible now! Clavering's groom is a traitor—the hired spy of Lord Harlesdon. It was he, no doubt, who told his lordship everything concerning yourself — the duel——Oh, I am lost—I am lost!"—and she covered her face with her hands, sobbing and gasping convulsively, but shedding no tears.

I almost began to repent of having revealed this secret to her ladyship; and I was debating within myself whether I had acted wisely and prudently or not; when, slowing removing her hands, she fixed upon me her haggard looks, saying, "Mary, I do not for a moment blame you for your

conduct of last night. I am well persuaded that you, in the first instance, became an unwilling listener, and that once there, in the arbour, you had no alternative but to remain. Oh! having learnt, then, all my sad history of love, and guilt, and hypocrisy, you can but too well enter into the goading agonies that I experienced throughout the scene in the barouche this morning! But too truly did my husband affirm that there was a revenge which an outraged husband might take more keen and bitter than that of duels and law-suits; and this revenge is he taking with me in all the intensity of its keenness, and all the malice of its bitterness! Yes, he means to break my heart by slow degrees—to conduct me by an incessant, though gradient, series of tortures, to an early tomb! Would you believe, Mary, that so soon as I was recovered ere now, he proposed a walk along the bank of the river, that the breeze might refresh me; and all the time was his discourse made up of malignant sarcasm, cutting allusion, bitter taunt, and searching irony? Heavens! to live such a life as this for weeks and months—perhaps for years!"—and as Lady Harlesdon spoke, she trembled all over with a cold shuddering.

The barouche now drove up to the door; and Lord Harlesdon, entering the room, announced that it was ready. He then escorted forth his wife with every appearance of fond courtesy, so that the inhabitants of the farm should not suspect there was anything wrong between them. I, of course, took my seat inside the vehicle, with Bella upon my lap; and I felt just as if I were entering into a torture-chamber with the horrors of which I already had the bitterest experience. The equipage drove away; and during the hour occupied in the ride back to Harlesdon Park, his lordship continued to discourse in pretty well the same taunting, sneering, and sarcastic strain as in the forenoon. But the string he now chiefly harped upon was my having alighted from the carriage to avoid Clavering, which of course he full well suspected, although that reason had not been given in his presence. It was quite clear that he endeavoured to madden his wife with jealousy in respect to the Baronet and myself. I was so bitterly annoyed and felt so truly wretched, that I would not speak a word. He put many questions to me relative to Clavering—at one time commanding, at another endeavouring to cajole me to answer: but I would not. When he addressed himself to Lady Harlesdon, she *did* reply, and in a manner showing that she did her best to seem not to comprehend the drift of all his taunts and allusions—though heaven knows, poor creature! she understood them all but too well, and writhed under them but too agonizingly.

Never was so great a relief experienced by any mortal as by me when we reached Harlesdon Park once more; and I at once flitted up stairs to the nursery, delighted to be emancipated from the torture of that scene with Lord Harlesdon. I learnt from Jemima that the Hon. Eustace Quentin had arrived; and the reader will perhaps think it unnecessary for me to say that I experienced a deep-felt secret pleasure at the thought of being beneath the same roof as himself. But on the following morning, true to his promise, he took his departure at an early hour; and I learnt at breakfast time that Sir Aubrey Clavering was likewise about to leave in the course of the forenoon. This he did; and I was truly rejoiced when the Baronet and his insolent domestic John Morley were no longer inmates of the mansion.

In the evening Lady Harlesdon came up into the nursery; and sending Jemima down stairs on some pretence, she took the opportunity of saying a few words to me.

"My dear Mary," she began, "I have no doubt you are anxious enough to hear whether anything new has taken place in my now wretched, wretched existence; and it is likewise a source of comfort and solace to me to be enabled to make a confidant of you. At dinner-time yesterday his lordship behaved just as if nothing had happened: but then my cousin Eustace and Dr. Vincent dined with us, and my lord is not only too well-bred but has also too much regard for his own pride and dignity to display his feelings before those who are not actually mixed up in his plan of revenge. With regard to Clavering," continued her ladyship, her voice becoming tremulous and the tears trickling down her cheeks, "I found an opportunity of just two minutes to breathe a word in his ears."

Her ladyship stopped short, and became convulsed with grief: then she rose—advanced towards the bed where her two boys were sleeping—and bending over them, gazed with an anguished tenderness upon their countenances. Next she proceeded, or rather staggered—for she was well nigh overpowered with her feelings—to the cradle where Isabella Clementina slept; and on the child's sweet cherub face did she likewise gaze long and tenderly. Indeed there was a surpassing eloquence in her looks—the eloquence of a mother's fond but melancholy love for the offspring whose father she no longer considered to be worthy of her affection!

"Mary," she resumed, returning to her seat, "everything is at an end between Clavering and me. With a breaking heart, but with a determined tone, did I tell him this much last night. He said to me, 'Then Mary has told you all!'—I replied, 'Yes, she has revealed to me all your insulting treatment.'—'But did she tell you no more?' he asked.—I gazed upon him in surprise, wondering what more there could have been to tell: when he said, 'Since you have decided, Clementina, that everything should be at an end between us, I should not like to leave you with the impression that I am altogether a dishonourable scoundrel towards Mary. I offered her my hand: yes, by heaven!' he added emphatically, 'I offered her my hand, but she refused me!'—Having thus spoken, Clavering walked away and I saw him no more last night. This morning, after breakfast, as he bade me good bye, I seized the opportunity to whisper in his ear, 'Beware of John Morley: he is a traitor. It is he who has watched and betrayed us.'—I saw that this announcement struck him like a thunder-clap: but instantaneously recovering himself, as Dr. Vincent was in the room, he gave me a look which implied significantly enough that he would know how to deal with his treacherous servant. Then, as I gave him my hand and said 'Farewell,' I added in a low voice, '*for ever!*' He wrung my hand with what I may term the fierceness of powerfully excited emotions, and took his departure."

Having given me this interesting narrative, not

quite however in so collected a form as I have recorded it, but with several self-interruptions of mournful exclamation and touching lament, Lady Harlesdon fell into a reverie of profound sorrow. She seemed to forget that any one was present, or that she was observed; and like a beautiful statue—the chiselled effigy of despair—did she then appear. I never saw her look so touchingly, so interestingly beautiful: the spirit of sorrow's pathos seemed to shine through her, and her look was like that of a youthful Magdalen, dying and broken-hearted!

"My dear girl," at length she said, slowly awakening from this profound reverie, "the proceedings of yesterday, in most senses so frightfully distressing for me, were at least relieved by one sunshine gleam; and that was your own kind sympathy. I saw then how deeply you felt for me—how much you pitied me: but after what Sir Aubrey Clavering told me last night, my admiration and esteem are more than ever excited with regard to you. Brilliant as the proposal was, and eagerly as it would have been caught at by any other young person in your situation—yet you, Mary, would not bestow your hand where you could not give your heart. Oh! I comprehend all the purity and excellence of your soul. Would to God that I were like you. But by having dared to make a mockery and a profanity of the holy rite of marriage, I have sealed my own unhappiness. Alas, alas! life will henceforth be a blank for me; and were it not for those dear children there, I would put an end to such a wretched, wretched existence!"

"Oh! for heaven's sake, my dear lady," I exclaimed, "do not talk in this manner:" and taking her hand I pressed it to my lips.

"Do you not know how vile and wicked a creature it is on whom you thus bestow your generous sympathy?' she cried, as if in a sudden access of frenzy: then all in a moment becoming calm—unnaturally calm—again, she said, "But no matter! I must fulfil my destiny; and the rest of my life must continue a falsehood and a deceit as the last few years of existence have been—with this difference however, that hitherto the veil of hypocrisy has been worn over the sweetest and tenderest love that ever bloomed as the choicest flower of the soul; and henceforth it must serve to conceal the bitterness of grief and the anguish of a remorse that will gnaw at my heart's core until the end. In a few days the house will be thronged with company: numerous visitors have been invited—and I presume that Lord Harlesdon will not write to put them off on any pretext. Secretly and insidiously will he prosecute his vengeance against me, while openly and ostensibly maintaining all the wonted appearances becoming our rank and position. But conceive, Mary—Oh! conceive what a torture will it be for me to have to do the honours of this mansion to a gay and a brilliant circle—to be compelled to assume smiles of welcome, to wear flowers upon the brow and diamonds upon the hair, while the heart is in utter, utter mourning!"

I endeavoured to console my poor mistress; and ere she left the nursery on this occasion, she embraced me with as much affectionate tenderness as if I were her sister.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GUESTS AT HARLESDON PARK.

A WEEK elapsed; and at the expiration of this interval Harlesdon Park was thronged with visitors. There was the Dowager-Countess of Bagshot, who came from an adjacent country-seat, attended by her two lady's-maids, her two fat footmen with her travelling-carriage, and a companion or "toady," named Miss Dossiter, whose duty it was to be always in the best possible spirits and to approve of everything that the Dowager might say. There were Lady Davenport and her two marriageable daughters, who wore very long ringlets and were particularly insipid in looks and "missish" in behaviour. But their mother, who had once been a very handsome woman, and who was now given to cards and scandal, was said to be resolved to get at least one of her daughters off during the present round of country visits; and she had now brought them to market at Harlesdon Park, where a number of suitable "matches" were sure to be found among the guests. Then there was the Hon. Miss Mardyn, an old maid of sixty, who never travelled without a tire-woman and three French poodles inside the carriage with her, a very fat page and a tall thin footman in the rumble behind, and an old coachman so stout, asthmatic, and wheezy that he always mounted the box by means of a short ladder or glazier's steps, or else had to be hoisted up by any willing hands that were near at the time. As for Miss Mardyn herself, I was informed that she had twelve hundred a-year, and that as her equipage, dress, and house-rent absorbed eleven hundred, leaving one hundred for pocket-money and nothing for eating and drinking, she lived the whole year round on her friends. Her time was divided between the card-table and her poodles, the excitement of the former being varied by chit-chat involving all matters of scandal. She never in her life was seen to take up a needle or a book; but sometimes made her tire-woman skim over a novel to her. She could not bear to be alone, not having the faintest shadow of a resource in herself; and yet it was a wonder how she could be happy in society, for never even by an accident had she a good word to say relative to any human being. As a matter of course she was so barbarously ignorant that a teacher at a charity-school was better acquainted with the rudiments of education; and yet she was not only tolerated but even actually sought after, for no other earthly reason than because she made a useful hand at the whist-table.

Then there was Lord Miltown—a tall, well-built, florid-complexioned man of sixty-five, who wore tops and cords in the morning and knee-breeches and silk stockings in the evening. His whole conversation turned upon horses and dogs: for he was the greatest sportsman in the Midland Counties. He was a special favourite in the highest circles, and it was considered a great thing to get Lord Miltown to stay a week or ten days amongst "a select reunion of fashionables," as the *Morning Post* and *Court Journal* phrase it. Doubtless his qualifications were highly recommendatory: for his lordship sat over the bottle every night until twelve, and was up at eight in the morning to get on horseback. He boasted that he had not gone to bed sober for the last thirty years, and had never had a day's ill-

ness: he declared that at sixty-five he was as keen a sportsman as ever, and was always in at "the death." His time was invariably divided in this way—eight hours on horseback, eight hours at table, and eight hours in bed. This was for the six work-days of the week, but on the seventh he lay in bed nearly all day, or played billiards for two or three hours till dinner-time. Such was the routine of this nobleman's life; and doubtless he was considered a very useful member of society—although it would be certainly difficult to imagine what advantage the world could gain from a man who was drunk or asleep two-thirds of his time and on horseback the other.

I have already spoken of a certain Dr. Vincent. He was the rector of the principal parish on Lord Harlesdon's estate—was a short, stout, puffy man, with a very red face, an enormous double chin overhanging his white cravat, and eyes like boiled gooseberries. Sententious, dogmatic, and important to his equals, but marvellously obsequious and cringing to his superiors, he was proportionately stern, haughty, and tyrannical towards the poor. If he did not dare say his soul was his own in the presence of Lord Harlesdon, he certainly would not allow his inferiors to look as if *they* thought their souls were their own in *his* presence. In the pulpit he was pompous to a degree, but wonderfully prosy; and as he himself invariably dozed in his own pew while his curate was reading the prayers, he had no great reason to complain if the said curate, together with the clerk and three-fourths of the congregation, slept in their turn while he was preaching his sermon. He was a Justice of the Peace; and inasmuch as he carried on a perfect crusade, amounting indeed to a war of extermination, against all poachers, he was a most especial favourite with Lord Miltown, who, being so keen a sportsman, naturally hated poachers as much as "any other vermin," to use his own phrase.

Amongst the visitors at Harlesdon Park, I must also mention the Hon. Captain Lavender and Ensign Bergamot of the Guards,—these two Exquisites having, as they expressed it, "tooled" themselves all the way down from London in a "drag," having previously arranged for relays of horses, so that they did thirteen miles an hour the whole distance, winning two thousand guineas from Lord Verrigreen on the achievement. Their grooms had accompanied them, and their valets had come round by the coach with their trunks; and heaven knows that to see the piles of luggage which the said valets brought down for the use of those two young gentlemen, one would fancy that they must each have been blessed with a wife and ten children to need such a quantity of trunks, boxes, and carpet-bags.

There was also a great literary character amongst the visitors—Mr. Charles Wiggins; who from having been a penny-a-liner on the *Morning Chronicle*, had by dishing up all kinds of absurdities which he called "humour," and throwing into the hodge-podge a dash of maudlin sentimentalism or sickly extravagance which he called "pathos," had managed to establish his renown as a popular author—that is to say, amongst a certain class. Dreadfully conceited—somewhat affected, impudent, and presuming—dressing rather gaudily than well—and courting observation even from the stable-boys, Mr. Charles Wiggins was nevertheless a very requisite ornament to the circle I am describing: because it was absolutely necessary to have a literary man in order that the party should be complete; and the one thus selected was of a mental calibre just suited to the average intellectual standard of Harlesdon Park. But in addition to the literary gentleman there was an antiquary—a Mr. Lumberton; a dull man of deep reading and profound ignorance, heavy in looks and discourse, but a marvellously bright star in the sphere of the Archæological Society. I read in the newspaper that on his health being drunk at a recent dinner of that learned body in London, just before he came down to Harlesdon Park, he returned thanks in "a neat and appropriate speech" of three hours and a half, during which he demonstrated the origin of the Pyramids, explained the hieroglyphics, and proved to the satisfaction of all present that Rome was founded two years and seven days before the date usually assigned to that event. From this fact the reader may suppose that Mr. Lumberton must be a very agreeable addition to the company at Harlesdon Park: but my lord was fond of having the reputation of patronizing literary merit and learning, and Mr. Lumberton was quite willing to be patronized for the sake of good "feeding," between which and his old musty folios he fairly divided his time. Besides, he had written an able pamphlet of three hundred and sixty-seven closely printed pages, upon the illegible inscription of a newly discovered tomb-stone in the parish-church, satisfactorily proving that the vault beneath contained an ancestor of the Harlesdon family who must have been buried there in the time of William Rufus. It would therefore have been impossible to omit such a gentleman from the circle of gaiety and fashion, high life and talent, assembled at Harlesdon Park on the present occasion.

Altogether, there were about thirty visitors at the mansion—forming, as the newspapers said, "the brilliant and select circle of fashionables which Lord and Lady Harlesdon were entertaining at their splendid and hospitable seat in Derbyshire." This paragraph, I should observe, was duly forwarded by my lord's "gentleman" to the *Morning Herald* and *Morning Post*, each letter containing a Bank-note for twenty pounds. Most of the visitors had brought some servants with them; and therefore the mansion was packed from floor to roof.

As the reader is already aware, my avocations were completely confined to the nursery; and therefore very seldom indeed was it that I had to descend to the servants' hall or into the kitchen. Nevertheless, there were times when I had to visit those regions for the purpose of fetching things that were wanted in the nursery; and I could not help over-hearing on several occasions the remarks which some of the valets, footmen, and grooms were wont to make relative to their masters and mistresses. The ladies'-maids too, when happening to be in the servants' hall, would join in the same kind of discourse; and the freest comments were thus made upon the characters, foibles, and follies of the various guests. But how could noble or fashionable masters and mistresses be surprised at their servants thus indulging in scandal, when they themselves were wont to set such an example in that way?

"I say, Richard," said one of the male worthies, addressing another in the servants' hall, "I think your master, young Bergamot, is very sweet upon one of old Lady Davenport's daughters?"

"Well, and if she manages to hook him," replied Mr. Bergamot's valet, "a nice conceited young jackanapes of a coxcomb she will get. But she herself looks like a wax-doll with the colour washed off the cheeks. Now I will just give you an idea of how my young master goes on; and if you don't agree that he's the most affected fool in all England, I will undertake to eat my own head."

Thereupon Mr. Bergamot's valet seated himself in a chair, threw himself back with an air of fashionable lassitude, ran his fingers leisurely through his hair, and imitating the cracked affected tone of his master, spake thus:—

"I say, Richard, mind you wake me at six o'clock to-morrow morning, or I shall be too late for Guard; and I say, fetch home that new regimental jacket from Bicknell's, and see that it's well padded in the breast and on the shoulders, so as to fill me out; and I say, see that Hoby has sent me home those new boots with the fixtures to the heels; and take care that the heels are an inch and three-quarters high, for it won't do to look short in the Guards; and I say, put out those trousers with the widest gold lace stripe and that fit so well over the boot; and I say, get me a strap to fasten round the waist, so as to pinch me in, or else I shall never get that jacket that Bicknell is making me to meet; and I say, go to Storr and Mortimer's and get me another gold snuff-box: I don't like the one that's embossed, and the engine-turned one I have given to Lavender, and the gold one with the picture in the lid I gave to Verrigreen, and I can't take either of the three or four lying about the room here, because if any one comes in they *must* see a lot of such nick-nacks tossing on the mantles and tables as if no one cared for them: and I say, mind you get some Prince's mixture as you come along—not the Prince's own receipt, nor yet Lord Plymouth's receipt, nor yet Trevelyan's receipt—but Lord Mordaunt's receipt—that's the best of the lot and is all the go now: and I say, look me out that new gold chain I brought home from Storr's to-day; and I say, just run down to the Club and see if Lavender is there, and ask him whether he will come up for an hour before I go to bed; and I say, have everything all in readiness in the morning, because it will never do to be late for Guard. Now you understand, Richard, and will remember all this?"

Such was the imitation which the valet gave of his master; and I must confess that it amused me, for it was perfect as the counterpart of the affected manner, cracked voice, and conceited air of that young Exquisite. But this was not all. When the peals of laughter which the valet had excited, ceased, he said that he would show how his master comported himself when getting up at six in the morning according to the previous night's intimation.

"Hallo, Richard—is that you? You don't mean to say it's six o'clock already? By Jove, I never shall be able to get up: I wasn't in bed till near four, and then was so blazing drunk I couldn't see. I say, Richard, don't I look very bad? What a thundering head-ache! Give me some hock and soda-water. That's right. Now I feel refreshed. But I say, Richard, you wouldn't believe what a fatiguing night I have had of it! First however let me observe that I was out rather earlier than usual yesterday. Let me see? drove down to Tattersall's at three—won five hundred of Lord Verrigreen, but lost a thousand to Sir Sharply Chaunter—then drove to Bond Street, sent home the cab, and lounged in at Storr and Mortimer's—chose that gold chain—walked down to Grange's and eat three ices—then drank two glasses of curaçoa, went to the billiard-rooms, lost some money—my hand trembled so I could not hold the cue—drank three glasses of cherry-brandy to steady it—walked down Regent Street, and hung on for twenty minutes to Lady Harlesdon's carriage at Howell and James's—walked up the street again, bowed to twenty-nine ladies of title in their carriages, and so got a dreadful stiff neck—looked in at the Club and read the Racing Calendar—booked three bets with Verrigreen—then called upon Lavender at his lodgings, found a bailiff sneaking up the stairs, kicked him down with so little mercy that I nearly broke his back—had to give him a ten pound note to hush it up, went and dined with Lavender at Long's—turtle so-so, ice-punch in perfection, venison prime—got half-seas over, and went with Lavender to Crockford's—managed to drop three hundred at the table, but came off all right by winning a bet of Verrigreen about spelling *pony* and *bay-window*—then came home and gave you orders about this morning's arrangements—then sent for Lavender again, went out with him, made a regular round, got blazing drunk, and home to bed a little before four."

This second caricature-display of his master was greeted with enthusiastic applause: and Mr. Richard evidently felt quite satisfied with having taken Bergamot off in his best style.

"I mean to resign directly after Christmas," said a tall footman in a livery that was not exactly new and might have even been termed shabby. "Old missus is the greatest skin flint I ever knew; but I shall hang on till the beginning of the New Year for the sake of the Christmas boxes."

"Christmas boxes indeed!" exclaimed another tall lacquey, very radiantly apparelled in blue and red and yellow: "you will have very little of that at your place, I can tell you. I once lived with your old master and missus,; and very glad I was to get out of the house again. I only staid there two months, and never had an instant for myself. The old woman used to keep me hard to work. It was always 'Now, Joseph, what are you idling for? there are your parlour-windows to clean—and there's the breakfast parlour furniture to dust: to-morrow is beeswaxing day, remember—and here you are dawdling about as if there was no work to do. Besides, there's all the books in the library to be taken down and dusted and put up in their places again; and to-morrow morning you will have to get up at six to beeswax the furniture, and the morning after at five to help the butler with the plate.'—And so she would go on working you to death, but making you eat cold meat, and grudging you anything but bread and cheese for supper. I was sick and tired of it, and so cut it. The old man was all very well in his

way—a good-natured fool enough, precious owlish, deaf and drunken, snuffy, but never out of humour."

"You know there's a regular smash-up at Trevelyan's in town?" said another of the yellow-plush gentry. "Well, I was with him once; and a precious good fellow he was too—never had a cross word. I was a groom then—his head-groom, and had all the management of his stud. He would come to me in the stable of a morniug and begin, —'I say, David, you must get rid of this cream-coloured cob here: he won't do at any price. Send him down to Tattersall's—nobody knows he's mine —and I will be there when he's brought out. I'll puff him up to the skies and pretend for all the world as if I had never seen him before in my life. So take him down as Mr. John Smith's, and the deuce is in it if he can't be got off for forty: and I only gave fifteen for him. But I say, David, of course you won't go down in my livery, you know: you will put on only your stable-jacket and overalls. And I say, David, get up the bay colt from the straw-yard, make him up and sell him also: he's got a touch of spavin, which will be worse in six months, and so we had better get him off at once. As for that brown filly there, I must say you have got her up uncommon well: her coat's like a looking-glass: and now she will fetch a good long price. Recommend her as a lady's horse—quite quiet—and as gentle as a lamb: though, by jingo! she is as full of vice as she can be, and very near broke my neck yesterday. By the bye, you must make the grey mare in that last stall yonder fetch two hundred: I know you can—though she is not worth a rap. She is twenty-two years' old and won't last three months longer. You can pass her off for twelve or thirteen: the teeth won't show anything now, and she will be snatched up greedily as a lady's horse to drive. But won't she come bang down the first time they trundle her down a

hill! And I say, David, I have agreed to sell the four-year-old yonder to Lord Verrigreen for three hundred: you know it didn't cost me twenty, and never has been worth a fig, so I don't think it is a bad day's bargain.'—In this style would Trevelyan go on, and it quite did one's heart good to hear him. Ah! he was a judge of horse-flesh, to be sure! Poor fellow, I am sorry he is gone: he was a regular gentleman, he was!"

Others who were present, and who had likewise known Mr. Trevelyan, or had heard of him, all corroborated the high panegyric thus passed upon him—though for my part, from all I had just heard, he appeared to me to combine the varied qualities of villany which constitute the horse-chaunter, the swindler, and the cheat.

"Ah! mine is the master for being the very prince of coxcombs and affected fools," exclaimed the Hon. Captain Lavender's valet, addressing himself especially to Mr. Bergamot's domestic: "your's is not a bit worse than mine, nor yet so bad—though *we* shouldn't criticise their extravagances, since we profit by them. Now I will just tell you what Captain Lavender said to me the other day. 'Jenkinson,' says he—for he always calls me by my surname—'Jenkinson, we are going to stay at the Harlesdons for a week or so, and I must go down in good form. Bergamot will go with me, and his man will accompany you. You two will come round by the coach and bring the heavy baggage with you; so you must start the night before by the Derby Dilly, and at Derby you will get a van for Belper, and from Belper a fly to the Park. But mind and look after my wardrobe. I see I am alarmingly short of plain clothes—quite alarmingly so: in fact my wardrobe never was at such a low ebb. Only fifteen pair of trousers, thirty-seven waistcoats, eleven frock-coats, and six dress coats. I counted them all this morning, Jenkinson, and was horror-struck. Then as for boots, why, I could only see twenty-two pair. What in heaven's name has become of all the rest? By the bye, I dare say you have heard a report that I am queer; and so I am—as queer as blazes: but when I have been to the Harlesdons, I shall just drop over and see my old fool of an uncle Lord Pomperton, and am sure to get five thousand out of him. That will put me to rights for the present—at least for six months; and in the mean time I shall pick up a girl with money. But I say, Jenkinson, you *must* mind and put me up those sixteen dozen new cambric-handkerchiefs that came home the day before yesterday. By the bye, have the six dozen new shirts with the worked fronts come yet? Oh! very good—to-night, eh? Well, mind they are sent, and don't forget to put in at least six dozen pair of silk stockings. You know how soon I wear them out; and one must not stand the chance of running short when on a visit. And Jenkinson, pray don't forget to put in at least six dozen pair of kid gloves—three dozen white for evening, three dozen lemon-coloured for day-time. And Jenkinson, I must have a good supply of *Eau de Cologne*, and five or six other different essences. Go to Atkinson's in Bond Street and tell them to send in twenty guineas' worth: they will put us up the right sorts, with variety enough. And pray don't forget oils and pomatums. And I say, Jenkinson, just think of seeing Lord Pembroke's valet presently and get his receipt for blacking: it is made with brandy and curaçoa and maraschino, and only costs after all about five guineas for a wine-bottle full—that's not dear, you know, Jenkinson, for good blacking. And I say, Jenkinson, mind you put in my flageolet and my flute; and bring my violoncello: and also let me have my musical snuff-box and any other nicknacks you can think of. But pray don't forget quantities of pearl tooth-powder; and I must have some of that soap a guinea the cake and which only lasts for two washings; for it does make the hands so beautifully white. And Jenkinson, get me some musk and some myrrh. I am very fond of myrrh; there is something classic in it, because it was used in heathen sacrifices. And I say, Jenkinson, put me in too suits of regimentals in case I should like to appear in them by way of a change. And Jenkinson, you must see that there is champagne, and hock, and soda-water, and half-a-dozen sorts of Rhenish wine, put into the *drag*; and if I think of any thing more I will let you know presently.'"

"Ah, well! my master is not only a coxcomb, an exquisite, and a fool," exclaimed another of the valet-tribe, "but also a precious rogue into the bargain. It's Octavius Lapwing I am talking of—the nephew of that old mass of counterfeits and falsities, Lady Bagshot. A precious string of orders he gave me t'other day! 'Edward,' said he, 'I am going down to stay with the Harlesdons, and you will go with me. I shouldn't think of going near the place, for I hate old Harlesdon and think her ladyship a *leetle* too sentimental; but my precious old frump of an aunt is to be there, and I mean to get on the wrong side of her when she is lucky at cards, and make her fork out all her earnings. Oh! she is a precious old chouse at cards, I can tell you. She never hides a trump under her cambric handkerchief—oh no, not at all! If I don't fleece her pretty handsome, she won't try her best to get me a post in a foreign embassy: so I must make myself as obnoxious as I can to the old harridan, that she may procure me an appointment so as to get rid of me; for by jingo! I must get out of the country soon, or it will be a deuced sight too hot to hold me. I can't keep on much longer—a hundred thousand pounds of debt and eighteen pence to pay it with: that's about my condition. But I say, Edward, you must stay behind me forty-eight hours, so as just to tranquillise things a bit and prevent any one sending or coming down to Harlesdon Park to bother me. Go to Langhams' the jewellers, swagger in as impudent as you please, and tell them you have come for my bill, and that as I have heard they have been speaking about it, I never mean to deal with them again. They will open their eyes; and you can just look knowing and drop a hint that an old uncle has suddenly died and left me a quarter of a million. They will be ready to eat their heads off for ever having bothered me, and will request you to say a good word for them. You can tell them that they may perhaps send round some watches and snuff-boxes, some chains and rings, and studs, with a few trinkets that will suit ladies, or what not; and they will be sure to nibble at the bait. So if they do, you can take the whole lot of things to the pawnshop, and bring down the money to me into Derbyshire. Or stay—you will have to use some of it as I am going to tell you; because there's a cool two hundred I owe to Lord Miltown, and as that's a *debt of honour*, it must be settled at

once. And so you must pay it into his bankers', because he will be down in Derbyshire and would blow on me if I didn't pay. And then, too, you must pay three hundred to that ragamuffin of a jeweller in Piccadilly who swears I got his things under false pretences and that he will have me up for swindling. But don't think of paying the Regent Street tailor, although *that* case is really very bad: for I got him to cash me a cheque when I knew I had not a farthing at my bankers'. That *is* swindling, if you like: but then as he's a good-natured, easy, soft-pated old fool and doesn't condescend to such low talk as about magistrates, and constables, and giving into custody, and so on, we need not bother ourselves about him. You may manage to get the trunks out of the lodgings here without paying; and by the bye, what a tremendous bill it is they have run me up! Eight guineas a-week for apartments—half a guinea for breakfast every morning—it's true I have plovers' eggs and cold pheasant—dinners and wine, coals, candles—heavens! I never saw such a bill. Seventy-six guineas in a month—infamous! But thank God it will never be paid. They deserve to be punished as regular swindlers. And I say, Edward, that girl Jane Harris will be calling. I told her to come the day after to-morrow on purpose, because I shall be off to-morrow: so you can tell her that I am gone to Paris, and she is sure to go there in search of me. Of course she has got no money: in fact it's for money she is coming to-morrow: but she will pawn and pledge every rag she has to come after me and drag the child along with her. What a bore it is to be so loved by a girl that one's tired of! However, put her on the wrong scent, let her be off to Paris, and as she must of necesity arrive there destitute, I will be hanged if she will very easily get back again!'"

Mr. Octavius Lapwing's valet went on for a considerable time in the same strain, and with similar volubility, making out his master to be one of the most accomplished scoundrels that ever basked in the roseate light of a drawing-room instead of herding with the felonry of New South Wales. Indeed, to listen half-an-hour to the gossip of the valets, footmen, and grooms assembled in the servants' hall—to hear them, with the utmost boldness and the coolest audacity imaginable, parade the most secret affairs of the households to which they belonged—and to observe them take off their masters with the most life-like mimicry and the most admirable caricature,—all this served to open the eyes and enlarge one's experiences amazingly relative to the follies, the foibles, the vanities, the vices, and the villanies of fashionable life. But who can blame those valets, those footmen, and those grooms for thus mercilessly laying bare the characters and lacerating the reputations of their masters and mistresses, when it is remembered that these menials are in every way spoilt by the examples of their superiors? How can servants have any regard for matters which ought to be kept secret, when masters and mistresses are constantly feasting themselves with scandal relative to their neighbours? How can a valet, if he entertain true manly feelings, be otherwise than disgusted with the effeminate coxcombries and finnikin conceits of such beings as Lavender and Bergamot? How could any dependant be supposed to entertain respect or love for such a consummate scoundrel as Octavius Lapwing? How could such a servant remain honest and truthful while aiding and abetting in his master's rogueries?

But I will not dwell any longer upon this subject. Suffice it to say that all my experience, not a tithe of which is however yet recorded, goes to prove that what servants *are*, such they have been *made* by their masters and mistresses, and that all the faults which characterise the former have sprung from the example or treatment of the latter.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LEONARD AND ELLEN.

Harlesdon Park continued to be thronged with guests until the commencement of Christmas week; and then they all departed, either to their own homes, or to the dwellings of those relatives with whom they were accustomed to pass that festive season. The mansion became comparatively quiet again: but just at this period an incident occurred which filled both Lady Harlesdon and myself with a considerable amount of apprehension. This was the sudden appearance of John Morley, Sir Aubrey Clavering's groom, at the Park, and his being closetted for nearly an hour with Lord Harlesdon. But greater still was her ladyship's dismay, and in which I partook, on learning that Morley had just been received into his lordship's service as head groom, and that he had forthwith entered upon the duties of his office.

During the few weeks which had elapsed since the memorable scenes of the arbour, the barouche, and Farmer Johnson's, there had been an incessant whirl of gaiety at the Park—so that Lord Harlesdon had not found very many opportunities of secretly planting fresh daggers in the heart of his wife. Nevertheless he had from time to time given her ladyship to understand that he was still bent upon an implacable vengeance, and that he merely tolerated her beneath his roof, or avoided exposure, because his pride would not allow him to stand before the world as the duped and deluded husband. For, somehow or another, in high life the artfulness of the female sex has managed to invest the character of a betrayed husband with a certain amount of ridicule, so as to lessen the enormity of the wrong and induce timid and weak-minded men, who tremble at the world's scorn, to think twice ere they publish their own dishonour by proclaiming their wives' shame.

During the few weeks of gaiety, therefore, Lady Harlesdon had experienced at all events a partial respite: but now the sudden appearance of John Morley at the Park seemed to threaten a commencement of a new phase in Lord Harlesdon's revenge. Whether his malignity in any way extended to me, was not quite certain. That he had played me off with Clavering against his wife so as to madden her with jealousy, was no proof that he entertained any ill-feeling towards me: indeed it was probable that I was altogether too insignificant to engage his attention. Such was my belief: and therefore when I said just now that Morley's presence was a source of apprehension to me as well as to Lady Harlesdon, I did not

mean personally on my own account, but for the sake of my noble mistress. The circumstance was alike annoying and perplexing to us both: for she made a complete confidant of me and breathed all her secret thoughts to my ears.

"What can possibly be the meaning of this man's presence here?" she asked over and over again, while seated with me in the nursery. "Has he been taken into my lord's service as a recompense for betraying me? or is he introduced into the household so that whichever way I turn I may stand the chance of running against a man whose eye I can never meet without blushing? or is some deeper purpose involved and some darker plan of vengeance chalked out, wherein this hireling wretch is to play a part?"

Vainly did I endeavour to conceal my own uneasiness and inspire her ladyship with confidence: she could not shake off the misgivings that had fastened upon her, and which were the more painful because so vague and indefinite.

"However," she suddenly exclaimed, with the firmness of one whose mind is all in a moment made up, "if my position becomes less tolerable than it is—or if circumstances transpire to convince me that deeper evils are brooding—I will fly, Mary, with the children, and you must come with me. For their sake have I vowed to endure as much as it is possible for human patience to support: and moreover I know that I deserve all the punishment that can be inflicted upon me. Indeed, I would make any sacrifice of which my courage or my energies are susceptible, in order to maintain my position and still appear as an honoured wife in the presence of the world. Yes—such has been my resolve, in order to save my children from the stigma which the publicity of their mother's shame would affix upon them. But there is a point at which human endurance stops—or rather at which the most servile patience may be goaded to frenzy. If I should be put to such a test, I will then leave—I will fly—I will dare all—risk all—exposure, shame, everything!"

My mistress had worked herself up to a pitch of desperation which constituted indeed for the moment an unnatural calmness: and without waiting for any reply which I might offer to her remarks, she rose and quitted the room.

It was about eleven in the forenoon, three or four days before Christmas, when the little incident just recorded took place. The weather was fine and seasonable: the atmosphere, though intensely cold, had a certain crispness in it, most friendly for vigorous health: and there was no snow upon the ground, which the frost had rendered hard as marble. Little Bella had a severe cold and could not go out: Jemima, who did not much relish the chill weather, volunteered to remain at home with her; and I accordingly took Master Alexander Adolphus and Master Albert Henry for a walk. These little boys were respectively three and five years old, and were nice children. Indeed the prattle of the elder always delighted me: I could sit and listen to him for a long time without the slightest sensation of weariness, in the same way that one may listen to the gushing melody of a bird. For to me there has ever been a sweet music in children's voices, when the little ones themselves have been amiable and good; and throughout all my experience in the nursery and with those innocent beings, I have invariably remarked that there was something sinister or wrong in the character of either man or woman who did not love children.

Well, with my two little charges—one hanging to each hand, and both wrapped up in the warmest clothing—I sallied forth for a ramble. Emerging from the Park, we had walked about half-a-mile along the road when one of the children complained of being thirsty; and observing a cottage at a short distance, I resolved upon repairing thither to procure some milk for the little ones. We had to pass out of the road and traverse a couple of fields: but as the ground was so hard and there was a good pathway, it was no disagreeable walking. As we approached the gate leading into the second field, I observed a man drawing near; and with much civility he ran forward to open the gate for me and the children to pass through. As I turned my head to thank him, I could not help noticing that although he was dressed in the humblest attire of a rustic, yet that he had altogether a superior look. He was a young man, not above three or four-and-twenty—tall and well-made, and with nothing of the ungainliness or awkwardness which so frequently characterize agricultural labourers. There was likewise a neatness in his appearance and an intelligence in his looks still more calculated to attract the notice of a passer-by; and it at once struck me that his rearing must have been superior to his present condition. He received with a graceful bow my acknowledgment of thanks for his civility, and observed "that it was a fine morning." I answered in the affirmative; and as I passed on with my two little charges, he closed the gate. But almost at the same minute two horsemen, who were scampering across the field, galloped up to the spot; and I immediately recognized Lord Miltown and Dr. Vincent.

"Hallo, you fellow! open the gate there!" exclaimed his lordship in a loud imperious tone. "Why, what the deuce does the scoundrel mean? Do you hear me, sirrah? Open that gate, I say—or by Jove! I will come and horsewhip you within an inch of your life."

"If your lordship dares to lay a finger upon me, or touch me with that riding-whip, I will not answer for the consequences," was the response given by the young man.

"Ah! what? Leonard Percival?" exclaimed Lord Miltown. "Is it you?"

"Come, Leonard, don't stand looking thus impudently at us," said Dr. Vincent in a pompous tone of majestic remonstrance; "but open the gate. You should know how to behave to your betters——"

"Betters indeed!" echoed the young man, whose name I had now learnt to be Percival. "Think you that I regard a bloated parson or a heartless aristocrat as my betters? *Betters* perhaps in the worldly sense of the term!—*betters* so far as broad cloth on the back and gold in the pocket are concerned!—*betters* likewise in all that regards gluttonous living and copious wine-bibbing!—but not my *betters* in those attributes of man to which nature gives its own inimitable stamp of nobility! And if I at this moment am not dressed as well as ye, whose fault is it?—who helped to precipitate the ruin of my poor thought-

less, extravagant father?—who, while pursuing a wretched hare, trampled down his corn-fields and then involved him in expensive litigation when he demanded recompense? It was you, Lord Miltown! Who distrained for his tithes and caused the very bed to be sold from under him? It was you, Dr. Vincent! Think you, then, that I am base, grovelling, and servile enough to stand and open the gate for such as you? No—I would perish sooner!"

The suddenness with which this strange altercation sprang up caused me to halt and turn round to survey the parties in their quarrel. It was evident enough that when Lord Miltown first commanded the rustic to open the gate, his lordship did not recognize who he was; but that when the young man turned to fling the defiance of a refusal in the teeth of the nobleman, the latter was not over well pleased on discovering who he was. I was struck by the dignified manner with which Leonard Percival drew himself up to his full height and addressed the nobleman and the clergyman in the words of cutting reproach. They did not interrupt him: I could even see that for the moment they were so overwhelmed with guilty confusion as not even to know how to put a good face upon the matter;—and as I beheld Leonard Percival thus chastising those proud ones with the unadorned eloquence of truth, while his dark eyes flashed fire and his whole form seemed to dilate with the grandeur of his indignation, I could not help contrasting the lofty and imposing appearance of nature's nobility with the world's artificial aristocracies of rank and wealth as personified in the fox-hunting lord and the corpulent red-faced clergyman.

"All this insolence," exclaimed Lord Miltown, now recovering his presence of mind, and therewith his characteristic arrogance, "is very fine, Master Percival; but take care you don't get the worst of it."

"As sure as there's a county gaol, and that county gaol has got a treadmill in it," said Dr. Vincent, his rubicund countenance now actually purple with rage, "you shall have a taste——"

"Ah! if you dare associate my name with that of infamous punishments," cried Leonard, his own countenance flushing with a renewed access of indignation, "I will tear you from your horse, all parson though you are!"

"Here, Jacob! Jacob!" vociferated Dr. Vincent, as he suddenly descried a man who had just entered the field through an opening in the hedge, about a hundred yards from the spot where this scene was taking place.

The individual thus summoned was one of Lord Harlesdon's gamekeepers. He was a middle-aged man, with a dark sinister countenance—a cringing manner towards his superiors, but capable of all kinds of tyranny towards those whom he had it in his power to molest. No one liked him, unless indeed it were such persons as his master, or Lord Miltown, or Dr. Vincent; and these no doubt had a special liking for Jacob Harper, because he was an inveterate enemy of poachers, and furnished more employment for the justices of the peace and consequently for the county treadmill, than any other gamekeeper in the whole district.

Upon being thus loudly summoned by Dr. Vincent, Jacob Harper, who had his gun in his hand and was followed by a couple of dogs, hastened up to the spot; and instantaneously perceiving from the looks of the three actors in the scene that something was wrong, he had no great difficulty in guessing the truth.

"Your most obedient, my lord," he said, taking off his cap. "A fine morning, reverend sir:"—then turning sharply round towards Percival, he exclaimed with a sudden alteration of tone, "What the deuce are you doing there, standing with your arms folded like that, instead of opening the gate to let his lordship and the rector through?"

But without deigning any reply, Leonard Percival merely gave a scornful curl of the lip, and turning round, began to walk slowly away.

"The insolent scoundrel refused to open the gate for us," said Lord Miltown: "and he has been abusing me and my esteemed friend Dr. Vincent in a scandalous manner."

"Indeed, my lord?" said Jacob Harper. "Shall I take the fellow into custody and lodge him in the cage? I have had an eye on him for some time past——"

"Oh! I have no doubt he is a poacher," exclaimed Lord Miltown.

"Doubt!" ejaculated Dr. Vincent: "there *can* be none. I am sure of it. He must have three months of the treadmill as a rogue and vagabond."

Instigated by the vindictive hints thus thrown out, and anxious to show his zeal to such patrons, Jacob Harper sprang over the gate and hastened after Leonard Percival. It did not strike me that perhaps it was somewhat indiscreet on my part to remain a spectatress of this scene: but the proceedings had rapidly assumed a degree of interest so strong as to rivet me to the spot; and I still stood gazing as Jacob Harper rushed in pursuit of Leonard Percival. The latter walked on without either quickening his pace or turning his head—though of course he must have heard the footsteps behind him. And now Harper overtook him, and seized him by the collar. What followed occurred with the celerity of lightning. A sudden blow was dealt by Leonard's powerful arm; and the gamekeeper was levelled to the ground as if he had been shot. His gun, falling with him, went off, and its contents lodged in one of the dogs, killing the animal upon the spot.

Leonard walked on as unconcernedly as if nothing had happened: while Jacob Harper began slowly and with evident pain to raise himself from the ground. He was very far from manifesting any inclination to renew the attack; and I heard a bitter imprecation fall from Lord Miltown's lips, while Dr. Vincent exclaimed with an unchristian-like ferocity, "By heaven, Leonard Percival shall smart for this!"

The little boys, frightened by the discharge of the gun, were clinging to me in their alarm; and the youngest began to cry. I accordingly turned hastily away and led them on across the field towards the cottage in the direction of which we were bending our steps at the time this little episode occurred. While proceeding thither, I reflected upon what had thus taken place. It seemed to me that an entire narrative of oppression on the one side and of deep wrong on the other had been laid bare in a few moments to my comprehension; and the characters of the nobleman and the parson together stood out in odious contrast

with the lofty disposition and independent mind of Leonard Percival.

On gaining the cottage, I knocked at the door, which was immediately opened by an old woman whose appearance was not only neat with regard to apparel, but also most prepossessing in looks. She seemed to be a homely, simple-minded, good-tempered dame that had never done an injury to a human being and would not do one for all the world, but who in her own humble way was an estimable member of society. She had seen me pass that way before with the children on two or three occasions, and, living so near the Park, of course knew full well whose children they were. She therefore at once invited us to walk in,—placing seats for us, and not only giving the children milk, but insisting upon offering them, as well as myself, such other refreshments as she had in her cupboard. These however were gratefully declined: but I remained to converse a little while with the good-natured old creature.

"Do you know," I inquired, "any one of the name of Leonard Percival?"

"Leonard Percival!" echoed the dame: and methought that a smile of mingled satisfaction and sadness instantaneously appeared upon her countenance. "Oh! I have known him since he was a child; and a finer young man both in person and in disposition exists not in the whole county. Ah! poor fellow, he has had his misfortunes. Know him indeed? aye, well do I know him. Why, he is engaged to be married to my granddaughter whenever things shall mend a bit," she added, a shade of sadness now suddenly deepening on her countenance: then after a brief pause she said, "But why, my dear, did you ask me about him?"

I then frankly told the good dame everything that I had so recently seen at the gate; and as I spoke I could observe that her looks became more and more sorrowful still: but it was with a sudden start and an ominous shaking of the head that she received the name of Jacob Harper the moment I mentioned it.

"Alas! I am sorry that all this has occurred," she said when I had done speaking. "Not that I would have Leonard act otherwise than he did: no, not for the world. But at the same time I regret that he should have come to an open rupture with persons who have it in their power to injure him. Perhaps however, my dear, as you are in the service of Lord Harlesdon, I am doing wrong to say a word against Lord Miltown or Dr. Vincent, who are your master's friends—and Jacob Harper, who is my lord's gamekeeper——"

"So far from doing wrong," I immediately replied, "methought you would have discerned from the way that I told my narrative how much I deprecated the conduct of these persons towards a young man evidently so civil, courteous, and good-natured as Mr. Leonard Percival."

"Ah! my dear child," said the dame, "it does me good to hear you talk thus. But if you are not in a hurry for a few minutes—and while, too, my Nelly is absent—I will just tell you Leonard Percival's little history. You must know, then, that Leonard's father occupied a farm which lies between Lord Harlesdon's and Lord Miltown's estates. This farm does not belong to either estate, but is the property of some gentleman at Derby. It's about three miles from here—just beyond that great hill which rises on the other side of the wood over there:"—and she pointed in the direction of which she spoke. "Farmer Percival was certainly an extravagant and very thoughtless man. He was nevertheless a good husband and a kind father: his wife was a superior sort of woman—and Leonard was their only child. It was not in any improper excesses that Farmer Percival squandered his money; but he was fond of having his house not only handsomely furnished, but also well filled with guests; and as he never sought pleasure away from home, his wife could not find it in her heart to remonstrate with him against the frequency of the convivialities which took place beneath their own roof. Then he was also fond of making experiments in farming—I mean with his land, and cattle, and crops, and so on. I don't much understand those things myself; but I am well assured that Farmer Percival was led to fool away a deal of money in these experiments—so that at last his affairs grew hampered and he had to borrow money. This he did not expend judiciously; and things got rather worse. Misfortunes never come alone. You know that Lord Miltown is such a keen sportsman that when in pursuit of a hare or in chase of a fox, he would not stop to rescue his own brother, if he had one, from drowning, or swerve out of his way to avoid riding over a human being. What then were a few paltry corn-fields to such a man? Nothing at all: and accordingly, his lordship never hesitated to gallop at the head of his entire hunting-party across Farmer Percival's land, trampling down the standing corn and doing a world of mischief. Moreover his lordship has got a warren and also large preserves close by the farm of which I am speaking; so that the rabbits and the birds did as much damage to that farm as if an army had marched over it. Farmer Percival was a generous-hearted, good, easy man, and put up with all this from his noble neighbour for some years: but when his circumstances got straitened and he was forced to look closer after the shillings and pence, he remonstrated with Lord Miltown. But in return he only got abuse; and I believe his lordship actually threatened to horsewhip the old man. Well, still Farmer Percival put up with it all: but as his lordship still made no scruple to gallop over the corn-fields and at one season did more than fifty pounds' worth of damage, Farmer Percival went to Derby to talk to his lawyer about it. The lawyer put his pen behind his ear, listened very attentively, and then told Farmer Percival that it was a clear case for damages. So to law did Mr. Percival and Lord Miltown go; and I have heard that his lordship swore that even if he was beaten in the suit he would nevertheless make it come so heavy for Farmer Percival that it should ruin him with the costs. And sure enough it did. Lord Miltown kept his word; and that business cost Farmer Percival many hundred pounds. There was such feeing of lawyers, and bringing up of witnesses to court, and such lots of land-surveyors employed to estimate the damage, that Farmer Percival had to tell out his gold in a fearful manner. Then there was a new trial moved for; and the whole affair was taken up to London, where it was heard all over again at Westminster before the very same judge who at the Assizes tried it at Derby—which seems to me rather strange; but I dare say it's all right enough—for of course a poor ignorant body like me does not know

anything about law. Well, Farmer Percival gained his suit, but lost so much by it that it pretty nearly ruined him. His wife died of a broken heart; and he himself was thrown on a sick bed. Dr. Vincent, who holds the three livings, as you are of course aware, is very particular in getting in his tithes: Farmer Percival had fallen into arrears, and as the Doctor is a great friend of Lord Miltown, it was not to be expected that he would show Mr. Percival much mercy. And he did not; but put in a seizure while the old man was lying in bed. A sale took place; and Farmer Percival, though he got better in health, never held up his head afterwards. His spirit was altogether broken: he had to give up the farm, and soon after died of grief. This happened six years ago, when Leonard was about eighteen; and so the poor young man, who had been decently educated and well brought up, found himself all of a sudden homeless and friendless on the face of the earth. Why I say *friendless*, is because those persons who had once been his father's boon companions and who perhaps really had the inclination to befriend the young man, dared not do so for fear of incurring the anger of Lord Miltown or Dr. Vincent: for I need scarcely tell you, Miss, how much those great personages have it in their power to injure tenant-farmers, particularly the small ones. Ah! it seems to me that there's something wrong, and not much like Christianity in all this."

The good dame paused and shook her head, while a tear trickled down her wrinkled cheek: but brushing it away, she hastened to make an end of her story.

"In this manner was it that poor Leonard was thrown altogether upon his own resources; and he was obliged to become a labourer to a poor farmer two or three miles from here. With him he has been ever since; and his conduct is most admirable. In fact a nicer, steadier, more hard-working young man than Leonard does not exist. The death of my daughter, who was a widow at Derby, three years ago, threw her Nelly upon my hands. Not but what the dear girl was welcome enough at my humble cottage, heaven knows! for she is a sweet affectionate creature, and as lovely as she is warm-hearted. Leonard and she really seemed to have been made for each other; and it is quite beautiful to see them together—to hear them talk—and to observe how rationally but at the same time how tenderly they carry on their courting. There is no love-sick nonsense—no petty jealousies—no silly squabblings, but a true manly affection on his part, and all a maiden's earnest love on her's. Some little business brought him this way just now, and he stepped in to see if Nelly was at home. But she has gone with butter and eggs to the village—though I dare say she won't be long now before she is back: and I should like her to come in while you are here, Miss, because I have already seen enough of you to make me know that you and Nelly would be very well pleased with each other."

I expressed myself in suitable terms of acknowledgment for the flattering opinion which the worthy dame had volunteered concerning me, and readily promised to wait a little while in the hope of her grand-daughter's return. Indeed I felt much interested in the day's adventure, and longed to see the young damsel who had been deemed worthy the love of so superior a man as Leonard Percival. I say *superior*, because I use the term in comparison with what he himself had been, and also because the aspect of the cottage plainly showed that she whom he loved must be as poor as himself. For though everything exhibited that neatness and precision which bespoke thrifty habits, and a delicate taste permeating the dark mist of penury, yet was it but too clear that the worthy dame and her grand-daughter were in the humblest circumstances so far as their worldly position was concerned. But the dame evinced an intelligence and had a certain look which seemed to speak of better days—an opinion strengthened by the accuracy of her language and the absence of any vulgarity in her manner. Indeed, she herself presently went on to inform me that she was the daughter of a large farmer and had been decently educated; but that at his death, many long years ago, she was left poor and had been compelled to marry in a lower situation of life. Her husband's death threw her entirely on her own resources; but she had managed to educate her daughter. This daughter had married, when young, a tradesman of Derby; but he had failed, and his life was afterwards a constant struggle with difficulties, till he at last sank under them. The widow soon afterwards followed him to the tomb; and their off-spring, the interesting Ellen, was thereupon thrown entirely on the scanty resources of the grandmother. This worthy dame's means of living depended upon a couple of cows and some fowls, besides a little garden producing vegetables; and it was to dispose of some of their butter and eggs that Ellen had gone to the nearest village.

The reader is now tolerably well acquainted with the circumstances of old Mrs. Baker and her grand-daughter, Ellen Kirkland; and by the time the dame had given me the particulars which I have just placed on record, the young damsel returned from the village. I was not at all astonished that Mrs. Baker should have spoken in such high terms of Ellen's beauty: but I was much struck with this beauty itself. She was of a tall figure, slightly and symmetrically made, but perfectly upright; and her style of loveliness was somewhat delicate, and therefore all the more interesting. There was little of the rustic in her appearance—naught indeed in her countenance, unless it were the bloom on her cheeks, somewhat heightened by fresh air and exercise above that of a dweller in a city or town. But her look was rather pensive, and fraught with a kind of intellectual melancholy—as if while she bent resignedly to the decrees of destiny, she nevertheless felt that her lot in the world was not exactly what it ought to be. No doubt, too, the misfortunes of her parents and their premature death had left a shade upon the damsel's soul; and pushing conjecture a little farther, it was also natural to conclude that, devotedly attached to Leonard Percival as she was, she felt that *his* destiny was likewise one of undeserved hardship.

Very beautiful was Ellen Kirkland—and with that interesting sadness of her's, full well calculated to make an immediate impression in her favour. She had light brown hair—large blue eyes—red lips—and a magnificent set of teeth. Her complexion, naturally very fair, was nevertheless slightly, but *very* slightly, browned with out-of-door occupations. Yet, had her plain and simple garments

been exchanged for silk or satin—had diamonds shone above the lofty open brow, and pearls encircled that finely arching neck—Ellen Kirkland might have taken her seat amidst the brilliant throng of a drawing-room without standing the chance of being singled forth as the one who from her plebeian origin had no right there.

When she had deposited her empty basket upon the table—having disposed of all its contents at the village—she threw off her straw-hat and was duly introduced to me. We immediately shook hands, and with much genuine cordiality too: for as the old woman had predicted, we took an immediate fancy to each other. Mrs. Baker proceeded, in as delicate and as cautious a manner as possible, to describe to Ellen the scene which I had witnessed at the gate in the field, and which I had already narrated to the old woman. Ellen listened with a deepening gravity: the colour perceptibly left her cheeks: it was evident enough that sore misgivings were taking possession of her heart. But I observed too that she also gave a quick start of indignation, and there was at the moment a sudden mantling of a deeper crimson than even the hue of healthful exercise on her cheeks, as the name of Jacob Harper struck her ear.

"Alas!" said Ellen, when her grandmother had finished the narrative, "I feel a strange presentiment of coming evil. It is not that I fear so much for aught Lord Miltown or Dr. Vincent may do of their own accord. It is to be hoped that they will forget the circumstance in the avocations, pleasures, and pursuits wherein their life is passed. But I do entertain the worst fears from the malignity of that man Jacob Harper."

"Wherefore, Ellen," asked I, "do you dread so much on his account?"

"Because," she answered, a blush appearing upon her countenance, "he endeavoured to render me faithless to Leonard; and because I refused to become his wife, has he from time to time threatened me with his vengeance. I know very little of him: but I feel persuaded that he is capable of any villany. That he hates Leonard Percival is beyond all doubt; and that he will endeavour to lay some snare to enmesh him, is to be apprehended."

"Do not thus give way to your fears," said I. "If Mr. Percival be prudent and cautious, as I have no doubt that he is, how is it possible for him to be caught in the toils which this wicked man may set?"

"Ah! you know not how justice is perverted—or rather how the law is tortured into an engine of tyranny and oppression against the poor in this district!" exclaimed Ellen Kirkland, with a visible tremor, as if of presaging apprehension. "Whatever Jacob Harper might swear as an accuser, such a Justice of the Peace as Dr. Vincent would believe; and then follows a summary conviction—two months perhaps to prison——Oh! it is dreadful to think of the way in which the poor are kept at the mercy of the rich! Grandmother here can tell you whether it is not so."

"It is," said the old woman. "Alas! what Ellen has told you is but too true."

"But stop," I exclaimed, a sudden idea striking me; and its hopefulness was reflected in my countenance. "Jacob Harper is one of Lord Harlesdon's gamekeepers. I will hasten back to the Park and mention to her ladyship sufficient particulars concerning you to interest her in your behalf. She may perhaps be enabled to disarm the gamekeeper of his malignant resentment, or at all events devise something to relieve you of fear."

Both the old dame and my new friend Ellen expressed their gratitude in the liveliest manner for this promise, and on taking leave of them I said I would return on the following day. Ellen embraced me affectionately; and as I sped homeward across the fields with my two little charges, I said to myself, "Two hours ago, and I was ignorant that the earth contained any such person as Ellen Kirkland. Now I am as deeply interested in her behalf as if I had known her all my life. Much as I deplore at any time to hear of misfortune overtaking any human creature, it would be a source of special grief—I may say of the profoundest affliction—for me to learn that this innocent, amiable, and lovely girl or her noble-hearted lover Leonard Percival sustained any sorrow or wrong."

Thus musing, I traversed the fields with little Alexander and Albert: but on emerging into the main road again, I was suddenly struck by a painful feeling—almost with a shock—on beholding Jacob Harper and John Morley conversing together. I know not how it was, or why I should in any way have associated the fact of these two men being together with the *other* incidents of the morning: but it certainly did fill me with an evil presentiment thus to perceive these birds of ill omen in each other's company.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

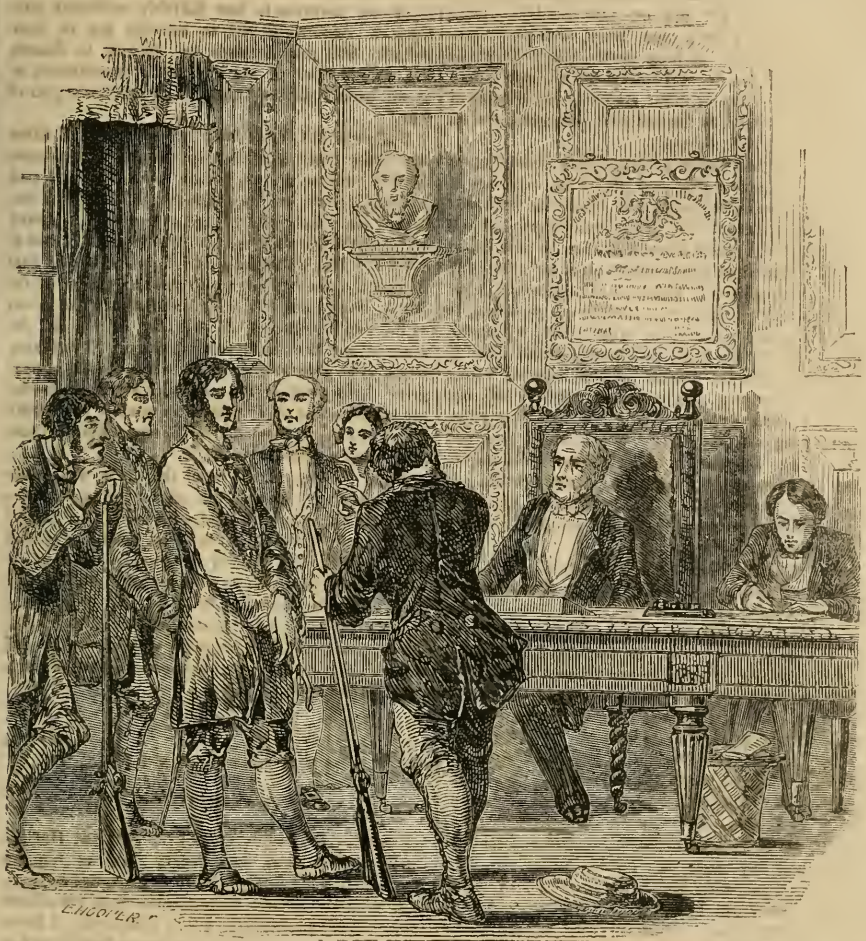
THE EXAMINATION.

At about five o'clock in the evening Lady Harlesdon came up into the nursery; and as Jemima was there, I did not choose to explain to her ladyship all that I meant to say relative to the affairs of Leonard Percival and Ellen Kirkland. I however took an opportunity to whisper hastily in her ear that if she would afford me five minutes in her own chamber I should be obliged, as I had something to communicate. Accordingly, when she rose to leave the nursery in a few moments, she bade me follow her,—observing, "I wish you to do something for me, Mary, down stairs."

When we were alone together in her bed-chamber,—for she and Lord Harlesdon had had separate rooms ever since the memorable day of the barouche adventures,—I told her what had taken place in the morning, and besought her sympathy on behalf of Leonard and Ellen. Her ladyship at once intimated her readiness to do whatever I might suggest, either to forward their views by helping them on in the world and enabling them to marry, or by seeking to protect them against the malevolence of Jacob Harper.

"I know not exactly what to advise, my lady," said I; "unless it be to beseech your ladyship's generosity to present them with a sum of money sufficient to enable them to leave this part of the country, where it is evident they have some enemies strong enough to ruin them."

"That will I do cheerfully, my dear Mary," replied Lady Harlesdon, "You possess an excellent



heart, and deserve to have a fortune at your own disposal to dispense in charity. But tell me, will a hundred guineas ensure the happiness of that couple? If so, for your sake, my dear Mary, that amount shall be cheerfully at their disposal."

"Oh! my dear lady," I exclaimed, my heart bounding with joy, "you will confer so much happiness that you can have no idea of its immensity! But the most fervid gratitude which the human heart can feel, will be your's on the part of Leonard and Ellen!"

While we were thus conversing, the sounds of loud voices, speaking quickly and in great excitement, met our ears. We hastened to the window, to listen rather than to look out, it being quite dark at that hour and that season of the year. But the vivid flame of the lamp burning over the front door threw a strong light around; and we could see the figures of four or five men ascending the steps. One appeared to be in custody of the rest; and as the lamp-light fell on his countenance, I instantaneously recognized Leonard Percival.

This fact I at once communicated to Lady Harlesdon, pointing out to her the tall form of the young man as it rose half a head higher than the persons who had him in their keeping; and as they passed into the mansion with their prisoner, we were enabled to observe that the hindermost was the gamekeeper Jacob Harper.

"Now, my lady," said I, deeply distressed at what I had just seen, "it is clear that the ruin of poor Percival is resolved upon. Some base charge has no doubt been devised by Harper; and if evil should happen to this young man, God only knows what will become of poor Ellen. Ah, dear lady! if you had but seen that sweet interesting creature, as I beheld her this morning, you would indeed take up her cause with the most generous warmth!"

"And so I will now, dear Mary," answered her ladyship, "without having seen your new friend at all. But you have said quite enough to interest me in her behalf; and moreover it is sufficient that you wish to serve her to enlist me in the cause. But we must not remain in idle discourse here. Hasten you down stairs to the library, where Lord Harlesdon always examines prisoners who are brought before him. The proceedings are not private: you will find, on the contrary, that most of the servants will be there to listen, and so it will not seem strange that you should be present."

I at once saw the importance of following her ladyship's suggestion, in order that we might ascertain the precise nature of the charge against Leonard Percival—watch the course adopted by Lord Harlesdon in his magisterial capacity—and then take counsel together according as circumstances should direct. Descending from her ladyship's chamber, I found on reaching the hall several of the servants, both male and female, passing into the library; and mingling amongst them, I entered in their company. We all remained standing at the extremity of the room near the door; and although it was spacious, and the prisoner with his captors was at the other end, I nevertheless could obtain a perfect view of Leonard's countenance. It was pale, but with the dignity of conscious innocence expressed in every lineament; and there was even a partial curl of the upper lip, as if his lofty nature could not altogether subdue a feeling of scornful defiance for the detestable machinations of his enemies. With my heart so completely, so undividedly devoted to another—and that other so perfect a model of masculine beauty—I may be permitted to observe that Leonard Percival was indeed a young man of a form, a bearing, and a mien full well calculated to win the heart and also to deserve the love of an amiable, innocent, and beauteous creature such as Ellen Kirkland. Nor shall I incur the risk of being reproached with a sickly sentimentalism or a maudlin affectation, if I declare that I felt at the time as profound an affliction on beholding Ellen's lover enmeshed in the toils of his enemies, as it was possible to feel for the misfortune of another.

In what remarkable contrast, too, did his own frank, open-hearted, and manly countenance appear by the side of the sinister faces of his captors. There stood Jacob Harper, leaning on his gun, and with dogged looks of subdued ferocity, his eyes gleaming with a reptile-light beneath his overhanging brows. Although the man evidently did his best to assume the look of one who was merely performing a duty without any personal feeling in the matter, yet was it impossible for him to conceal or for a spectator to help observing the gleam of malignant satisfaction which played amidst the sinister gloom of that bad man's looks. His four men, who were armed with cutlasses and pistols, were of equally vile appearance, and positively seemed to me as if any one of them was quite capable of swearing an innocent person's life away. Small chance, then, had the unfortunate being who fell into the power of this cohort of scoundrels!

I had time to make these reflections ere Lord Harlesdon entered the room. The reader will, of course, understand that his lordship was in the Commission of the Peace for Derbyshire; and it was, therefore, as a magistrate that he was now about to take cognizance of the matter thus brought before him. As he passed on to the farther extremity of the library and took his seat in a large arm-chair at the head of a writing-table, I watched his looks to ascertain, if possible, whether he himself had any personal feeling in the matter: but that cold, severe, inscrutable countenance afforded no indication of the kind. Indeed, it appeared as if his lordship entered upon the business with a complete official indifference; although it certainly struck me as being somewhat contrary to every idea of justice, however consonant it might be with law, for him to sit as judge in a matter where his own servants were concerned.

Lord Harlesdon was followed into the room by his "gentleman," who took a seat on one side of the table and prepared to write down notes of the proceedings. All this while a solemn silence prevailed in the library; but just as the examination was about to open, I felt some one press rather more closely against me than there seemed to be any need for, and at the same instant a voice whispered in my ear, "Ah, pretty Mary, displaying all the curiosity of your sex *again*?"

I flung round an indignant glance upon John Morley—for he it was who thus tauntingly, or else with a vulgar jocularity, reminded me of the arbour scene; and in order to escape from his contiguity I edged off to the extremity of the rank of domestic servants, about a dozen of whom were present—so that I was now close by a window the curtains of which were closed. However, Morley had not attempted to follow me to that point; and I speedily forgot his presence there, in the more absorbing interest of the proceedings which now took place.

"Who is this man?" asked Lord Harlesdon, fixing his looks upon the prisoner.

"His name, my lord, is Leonard Percival," replied the gamekeeper. "He was much better brought up than he now seems to be; and I suppose his bad conduct has brought him down to what he is."

"Were it not for these bonds," said the young man—and I now perceived for the first time that his wrists were confined with cords—"I would strike you down at my feet; and not even the respect due to his lordship as a magistrate should prevent me."

"Silence, silence!" exclaimed my lord's gentleman. "Such language as this will do you no good."

"But if I am to receive justice, it should do no harm," answered Leonard haughtily: and it was a strange thing to behold that individual in the homely rustic garb, wearing a demeanour more truly dignified, and a look more naturally noble than the proudest peer could have put on.

"Swear the witnesses," said Lord Harlesdon sharply, as if to put an end to farther bandying of words.

Jacob Harper and his assistant gamekeepers were accordingly sworn by the "gentleman;" and this ceremony being performed, the first-named individual proceeded to give his evidence in the following manner:—

"Please your lordship, as I was coming over the two ten-acre fields this morning, shortly after

eleven o'clock, I saw the prisoner lurking about in a suspicious manner under the hedges and creeping up to the plantations beyond. Knowing him to be a suspicious character, I watched him; and I thought his movements were like those of a man that's setting traps to snare game. But the place was too open for me to get very near him. Presently he came back again into the pathway through the fields; and just at the same moment Lord Miltown and Dr. Vincent rode up. So, without the least provocation, the prisoner began abusing his lordship and the rector in the most shocking manner. I never did hear such language in all my life: it quite made my blood run cold. The rector ordered me to take him into custody; but when I approached him and recommended him civilly to make an apology to his lordship and Dr. Vincent as I didn't want to hurt him, he snatched my gun out of my hand, knocked me down with the butt of it, and then out of sheer malignity took an aim at one of the poor pointers and shot him on the spot. He then bolted off as quick as ever he could cut."

The reader may suppose with what feelings of mingled astonishment and indignation I heard this artfully contrived tale, for the special colouring of which every fact was either infamously distorted or shamelessly exaggerated. Leonard uttered not a word; but although he listened in silence to the accusations made against him, I could see by his wreathing lip and flashing eye how strong were the feelings which had possession of him at the time. As for myself, I resolved that the real truth should be presently told, so far as I had been an eye-witness of the proceedings in the field.

"Your lordship will be pleased to understand," continued Jacob Harper, "that though I made my appearance at the time Percival was so grossly insulting Lord Miltown and Dr. Vincent, yet I was very sure he had not seen me watching him when he was moving so suspiciously about along the hedges and up by the plantations. So, when it was dusk, just after four o'clock, I and the men here laid wait near the plantations; and sure enough in a short time we heard somebody come creeping along, feeling for the places where he had set his snares. At last he fell right into the ambush we were laying for him; and after a desperate resistance we made him our prisoner."

For a minute I was staggered at this latter part of the gamekeeper's depositions: but when I again turned my eyes upon Leonard Percival, and beheld the same dignified air of conscious innocence upon his countenance, I felt that I had done him an injury even by a transitory suspicion of the possibility of his being guilty of setting the snares.

"Will you cross-examine this witness?" asked Lord Harlesdon, addressing the prisoner.

"No, my lord," was the calm reply. "A man who has already so grossly perjured himself, has got his tale too well arranged not to be prepared to support every detail with fresh falsehoods."

"You have no business, prisoner," said Lord Harleedon sternly, "to make so grave and serious a charge against the witness."

"Good heavens, my lord! look at the charge he has made against *me!*" exclaimed Percival, now unable to control an outburst of indignation.

"Silence!" said Lord Harlesdon. "Call the next witness."

Thereupon the four assistant gamekeepers one after another corroborated every syllable that Jacob Harper had given utterance to; and I could hear by the whispered remarks of the valets and footmen and other servants in my immediate vicinity, that they considered the case to be very black against Leonard Percival.

"Now prisoner," said Lord Harlesdon, "what have you to urge in your defence?"

"I have heard, my lord, the various statements made against me, with an indignation which has only been subdued by the feelings of scorn and loathing which I experience for this horde of perjurers."

"Prisoner, I cannot allow you to speak in this strain," interrupted Lord Harlesdon. "Give your own account of what has occurred; but throw no aspersions on the characters of the witnesses."

"But such men, my lord, would swear away a person's life!" exclaimed Leonard, his voice swelling with indignation.

"Again I order you to be cautious," said Lord Harlesdon imperiously. "Deal with the facts, sir—or I shall at once commit you."

"Then will I tell my tale with the precise truthfulness in which I was reared from my birth," said Percival, "and from which I have never in my life deviated."

"Proceed, sir, without these bombastic flourishes," interrupted Lord Harlesdon, more sternly still than before.

"First, my lord, with regard to the proceedings of the morning. I work for a farmer living two miles hence; and he sent me to the village on some business of his own——"

"Then why did you not proceed by the main road?" demanded Lord Harlesdon. "It is the nearest way."

"Because, my lord, I wished to call at the cottage at the end of the ten-acre fields; and I therefore came in that direction. Having called at the cottage," continued Leonard, "and not finding the person whom I wished to see, I pursued my way across the field; but on reaching the gate, rested a little while in the hope of seeing the person I sought returning to the cottage, in which case I should have hastened back. It was while I was thus pausing at the gate, that Lord Miltown and Dr. Vincent rode up. And here, before I proceed any farther, let me solemnly and sacredly declare that I never once deviated from the pathway—never crept along the hedges—never went near the plantations. On Lord Miltown and the rector approaching the gate——"

"Well, but we don't want any of these particulars," interrupted Lord Harlesdon. "You do not charge the assault—do you, Harper? It would be inconvenient, as it might necessitate the calling of Lord Miltown and Dr. Vincent as witnesses; in which case I should have to remand the prisoner: whereas if you only press the poaching charge——"

"Very well, my lord," said Jacob Harper, as a matter of course following instantaneously his master's suggestion: "then I only press the charge of laying snares for securing game and lurking about for an illegal purpose."

"Now then, prisoner, you have heard what has been said," exclaimed Lord Harlesdon. "What have you to urge against the charge?"

"But, my lord," exclaimed Leonard, "it is abso-

lutely necessary I should continue my defence in the proper order. I wish first to refute many misstatements made by Harper relative to the scene at the gate."

"But I cannot hear you on that subject."

"Nevertheless, my lord, you heard my accuser."

"Yes: but that charge is withdrawn. Proceed."

"My lord, I crave your patience," said Percival. "I have a witness to call—a young female whom I recognised as being in your lordship's service——"

At this moment I was about to step forward and proffer my testimony—to do which I felt myself armed with all the requisite courage.

"I tell you, sirrah," now thundered forth Lord Harlesdon, striking the table furiously with his clenched fist, "that I will hear no witnesses with regard to that part of the business. The charge of assault is withdrawn: I have nothing to do with it; and it will not weigh with me in any decision which I may presently give."

I shrank back, so suddenly confounded and abashed, that I felt as if I should sink upon the floor. It was one of those abrupt revulsions of feeling which prostrate all one's energies in a moment. I fancied that every eye was fixed upon me; though such could not have been the case, for Leonard Percival had mentioned no name, and my fellow-servants could not therefore for an instant suspect who the young female alluded to might be. But this did not strike me in the confusion and dismay which had so suddenly seized upon me; and shrinking half-way behind the window-curtains, I sank upon a chair that was in the recess. Almost immediately afterwards I was recalled, as it were, to the full possession of my senses again, by hearing the voice of Leonard Percival in vehement and dignified remonstrance against his lordship's mode of procedure: and not liking to attract observation by emerging again from behind the curtain, I remained where I was.

"Silence, prisoner," exclaimed Lord Harlesdon, still in a towering passion. "I have already tolerated more impudence from you than from any fellow that was ever brought before me; and this I have done simply because your accusers are persons in my service and the alleged offence is committed on my estate. Therefore, to do you the fullest justice, I have allowed you considerable license. Now, for the last time, I order you to address yourself only to the subject of the charge which is before me; and if you attempt to touch upon another subject, I shall at once commit you to the county gaol."

"My lord," resumed Leonard Percival, after a long pause, during which he had no doubt experienced the utmost difficulty in mastering his emotions; "in respect to this charge whereof your lordship speaks, I solemnly protest my innocence. I take the Almighty to witness my declaration, that I am thus innocent! I was returning across the fields, shortly after four o'clock, with the intention of calling at Dame Baker's cottage on my way home, when I was suddenly seized upon by these perjured wretches—bound with cords—and hurried hither. Vainly did I protest against this scandalous outrage. Even at the very door of your lordship's mansion did I renew the protest; when I was assailed with every kind of abusive epithet by Jacob Harper and his men, as your lordship's own hall-porter can testify. My lord, I do solemnly adjure you, as you yourself may some day stand before another tribunal—a much higher one than any earthly court of justice or magisterial judgment-seat—to take heed how you put faith in the tales of these false-swearers who are leagued to ruin me."

"Enough!" exclaimed Lord Harlesdon abruptly: then speaking in a quick harsh voice, evidently to dispose of the affair without further parley—for it was now his dinner-hour,—he said, "Prisoner, I consider the charge fully proved against you; and you stand committed to the House of Correction for two months as a rogue and vagabond. Away with him!"

"My lord, it is impossible," exclaimed the unfortunate young man, in a voice of ineffable anguish, "that you will allow this outrage to be consummated!"

I heard no more. The image of poor Ellen all in an instant rose up to my imagination—I beheld the beauteous creature pale and in despair—I was stricken with a horror and with an affliction as overpowering as if I were she. Indeed, at the moment, I completely identified myself with her, so strangely were my feelings wrought up. The effect was that my senses abandoned me, and I fell back in the recess in a profound swoon. The position of the chair in the angle of that recess prevented me from falling sideways; and as, I presume, no sound escaped my lips, and as moreover I was entirely shrouded by the curtain, my presence there was not observed by a single soul.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

When I returned to consciousness, the sounds of voices seemed to be mingling, as it were, with the thoughts that began to settle themselves in my brain; and it appeared to me as if I were awaking from a dream. But in a very few moments I became aware, not only of the reality of my present position, but likewise of the voices which I heard; and I therefore remained perfectly still.

"Now then, we thoroughly understand each other," said Lord Harlesdon; "and I will at once give you the reward for your services. But one thing is to be considered. You have arranged, Morley, that the post-chaise shall come from Belper, so as to be in the neighbourhood exactly at midnight. But how do you mean to entice the girl to the spot?"

"Oh! leave that to me, my lord," at once replied the groom. "I have got my plan all cut and dry."

"Well, well," said his lordship; "I know you are a very sharp fellow, and I will therefore trust the whole matter to you."

"I am glad your lordship has such a good opinion of me," said John Morley: "for I shall always endeavour to deserve it. I knew very well when first I desired my friend Jacob Harper here to hint to your lordship that I could reveal a startling secret if I chose and put your lordship up to some strange things that were going on—I knew very well, I say, that I should be able to keep my word."

"Yes, yes," observed Lord Harlesdon, somewhat impatiently, as if he did not exactly like the topic: "you have indeed, you have indeed! But tell me truly, John—and you also, Jacob Harper—have you both observed my solemn injunctions, and maintained a profound secrecy relative to this lamentable affair which so deeply concerns my honour?"

"I can assure your lordship," answered Morley, "that I have never breathed a syllable to a soul except my friend Harper here, to whom, as your lordship is aware, I in the first instance communicated all that was going on."

"Well, and *you*, Harper," exclaimed the nobleman: "have you also kept the secret to yourself?"

"I have, my lord, most sacredly," returned the gamekeeper. "Setting aside the respect I have for your lordship, it was not my interest to do anything contrary to your lordship's instructions."

"No, certainly not," remarked the nobleman: "for I promised you both that your reward should be handsome. Indeed, have I not shown you this evening, Harper, that I am desirous to serve you to the very utmost? You hinted to me that this Percival stood in the way of your love-suit; and I have removed him from your path for at least the next two months to come—and in that interval it will be your own fault, I suppose, if you do not induce the girl to become yours?"

"I think I shall, my lord," answered the gamekeeper, with a tone of insolent assurance; "and I am very much obliged to your lordship for having given that scoundrel Leonard Percival a couple of months. He fully deserves it: for I have often heard him speak disrespectful of your lordship"

"So you told me the other day," observed Lord Harlesdon, "when you first hinted that it was likely young Percival would be brought before me and that you were on the look-out for him. But I hope, Jacob, that there was at least some foundation for the accusations you made against him? because anxious though I am to do you a service, yet I should be sorry to have punished an innocent person."

"Oh, my lord! I can assure you it is all true, and Leonard is a most disreputable character. In fact, Dr. Vincent himself," added the gamekeeper, "said this morning that he knew him to be a desperate poacher; and Lord Miltown was scarcely less positive on the same point."

"Oh, well! if that is the case, I am glad I gave him two months," exclaimed Lord Harlesdon. "I had never seen the fellow before this evening—at least not to my knowledge—and I was instantaneously set against him by his impudent look. I don't like these beggarly wretches who display what I suppose they call an independent spirit. Besides, his whole conduct just now showed what an impudent rascal he is; and when I come to consider the way in which he insulted Miltown and Vincent this morning, I cannot possibly regret the course I have taken. But where did you order your men to lodge him till to-morrow morning, Jacob?"

"He is put up in the hay-loft over the stable, my lord," replied the gamekeeper; "and of course the trap-door leading up into it is locked fast; and as there is no window he can't possibly get out. To-morrow morning me and two or three of the men will take him over in a cart to Derby, and lodge him in gaol in pursuance of your lordship's *mittimus*."

"And you think that he is quite safe up in the loft?" asked Lord Harlesdon.

"I am convinced of it, my lord," replied the gamekeeper: "or else I should not for a minute have told the men to take him up there. Besides, he is bound fast with cords."

"By the bye," said Lord Harlesdon, "to whom did he allude when he observed that a young woman belonging to the household had witnessed the scene in the fields?"

"Mary Price," answered the gamekeeper.

"Ah, Mary Price! always Mary Price!" exclaimed the nobleman. "She seems to be mixing herself up in everything. But however——" and here his lordship lowered his voice to so subdued a tone that I could not catch another syllable of the sentence. "But now," he exclaimed, once more speaking in a manner quite audible to myself, "let me give you both a proof of my approbation for the manner in which you have kept the secret of Lady Harlesdon's conduct. First of all, however, here are twenty sovereigns in gold for the expenses of to-night's work—post-chaise, and so forth: and now I shall give you fifty guineas a-piece as your reward. But, ah! I have no small notes—nothing less than one for a hundred pounds."

"I have got fifty pounds at home of my own savings, my lord," observed the gamekeeper; "and so if your lordship will give me that hundred pound note, I can fetch my fifty presently and hand them over to Morley."

"Well, be it so," said Lord Harlesdon.

At this moment the door of the library opened, and a domestic entered to announce that dinner was served up.

"Very good—I will come in a moment," exclaimed his lordship; "so soon as I have finished giving certain instructions to the gamekeeper and groom here:"—then, the footman having retired, he asked, in a quick tone of apprehension, "You don't think that he saw me hand you the bank-note?"

"No, my lord," replied the gamekeeper. "I crumpled it up in my hand the instant the door opened."

"That is all right, then," rejoined the nobleman: "for it would not have been well for him to have seen money passing between us. And now I must once more enjoin you, John, to be careful how you——"

But I lost the remainder of the sentence, his lordship suddenly lowering his voice to a tone inaudible to me. He and the two men continued whispering for upwards of a minute; and though I caught a few words, yet I could not gather the sense of what they were saying. I however heard the name of Ellen Kirkland mentioned, I think by the gamekeeper—also that of Sir Aubrey Clavering by John Morley—and I was almost sure, but not quite certain, that I heard my own name whispered by Lord Harlesdon. His lordship then hastened away from the library; but Morley and Harper remained behind for another minute or two. They continued to discourse with each other in a voice too low for me to understand

what they were saying: nevertheless, I just caught enough to make me aware that they were speaking of money, and arranging some appointment—but for when, where, or for what purpose, I could not ascertain. However, it would appear that they settled the matter to their own satisfaction: for I heard the gamekeeper say, "Well then, that's arranged, and I will be punctual." Thereupon they both issued forth from the library, closing the door behind them.

All was now silent there; and I ventured to peep from behind the curtain. No human being met my eyes: the candles were burning upon the table—and I was the only occupant of the library. I waited a few minutes before I stole forth, lest by any accident Morley and the gamekeeper should have paused in the hall; as of course it would not do for me to be seen coming out of the library. At length I went forth—traversed the hall without being perceived by any one—and ascending the stairs, gained the nursery.

"Why, where on earth have you been, Mary?" asked Jemima the moment I made my appearance. "I saw you amongst the rest during the examination down in the library: for I got Jane"—alluding to one of the housemaids—"to mind the children while I ran down just to hear what was going on:"—then without waiting for an answer to the question she had put to me, Jemima went on to exclaim, "What a pity that such a nice young man should have got himself into such trouble. Did you observe how proud and indignant he looked? I really thought at one time he was innocent, and that Jacob Harper was trumping up a story against him: but when all the under-gamekeepers spoke as they did, my confidence gave way. After all, supposing he *is* guilty, I can't see what harm there is in taking a hare which runs wild and may be said to belong to nobody. But how very serious you look, Mary—and pale too—paler than usual. Has anything happened to annoy you?"

I was about to make some reply when little Miss Isabella Clementina, who was running about the room, fell down and hurt herself with a doll; and all attention was for a few moments absorbed in pacifying and consoling her.

"But what did become of you, Mary, after it was all over? It's a good hour since the proceedings terminated," continued Jemima; "and here have I been wondering all the while why you didn't come up. I missed you, too, all of a sudden. But I suppose you went to her ladyship?" she added, answering the question for me by means of a conjecture of her own. "Well, I declare, I am dying with thirst; and Jane doesn't bring up the urn for our tea. I will just run down and see to it."

With these words Jemima hastened from the nursery; and as soon as she was gone I began to think very seriously and gravely upon all that had taken place. I had said nothing in answer to Jemima's questions, because I did not choose to admit that I had been concealed behind the curtain in the library, listening to a discourse that was going on there, as I was fearful of incurring the suspicion of being a wilful eaves-dropper. From what Jemima had just said an entire hour had elapsed since the proceedings terminated; and yet the conversation I had overheard certainly had not lasted much more than half-an-hour. To say the least, then, I must have been twenty minutes in a state of unconsciousness behind the curtain. "Ah," thought I to myself, "if I had only been possessed of my senses the whole time, what plottings and plannings might I not have overheard." But as it was, I had only the vaguest and the most uncertain ideas relative to the conspiracy that was in progress. For that there *was* some dark scheme in embryo, was apparent enough. That post-chaise which was to be in readiness—and that girl who was to be enticed away—what could these things mean? Most naturally did I conclude, judging from the other observations I had overheard, that it was poor Ellen Kirkland who was to be carried off. But wherefore should Lord Harlesdon mix himself up in such a base and infamous plot? why should a proud and haughty noble condescend to become an adviser or accomplice in the atrocious treacheries of a miserable gamekeeper? I knew not: but I thought to myself that if I had not fainted away in the window-recess, but had overheard the whole conversation instead of a portion of it, I should probably have become acquainted with the entire plot, its motives as well as its ramifications!

What was to be done? Leonard Percival was innocent—and I was resolved to adopt some course to prove him so. Nor less was I determined to warn Ellen Kirkland against the plot which I believed was hatching against her. But as Lady Harlesdon had promised to interest herself on behalf of the lovers, I thought it prudent to do nothing until I had consulted her. It was now eight o'clock: at nine her ladyship would be sure to quit the dinner-table and ascend to the drawing-room, or most probably seek her own chamber. For she and her husband had to dine *tête-à-tête*, there not being a single guest at the Park at the time; and although they went through this ordeal to screen from the observation of the household the fact that there was a complete rupture between them, yet they did not remain in each other's company longer than was absolutely necessary.

I resolved therefore to wait until I could have an opportunity of consulting with Lady Harlesdon; and I composed my countenance and the flutter of my feelings as well as I was able by the time Jemima re-appeared with the urn for tea. She talked the whole time about Leonard Percival; and from her remarks it was plain enough that she had ere now learnt in the servants' hall that the general opinion was against the young man. Nor was this to be wondered at, considering the manner in which Jacob Harper's averments had been backed up by the evidence of his subordinates.

"But by the bye," exclaimed Jemima, an idea striking her, "they say down stairs, Mary, that it must have been you who saw a portion of the proceedings in the field: for every other female in the household says it was not her to whom Leonard alluded."

"Yes—I did observe a great deal of what took place at the gate," said I: "and I can assure you——"

At this moment a message was brought up to the effect that Lady Harlesdon wished to see me in her own chamber; and I accordingly hastened thither, Jemima enjoining me to come back as soon as possible and finish the explanations I had just commenced. On reaching her ladyship's

room I found her seated upon a sofa in front of the cheerful fire that was burning in the grate. She bade me place myself next to her, and then said, "Well, Mary, circumstances have taken a most unfortunate turn for that young man in whom you so generously interested yourself. It is just as well, however, that your eyes should have been opened at once relative to his true character."

"Is it possible," I exclaimed, "that your ladyship believes him guilty?"

"Possible, my dear Mary!" she answered. "How can I come to any other conclusion? Listen. You know very well that Lord Harlesdon and I go through the ceremony of dining together, for the simple reason that if we were each to have our separate table as well as our separate chambers, the whole scandal would be exposed at once. Well then, we sit down together—we go through the cold chill ceremony of all the courses—soup, fish, meat, game, sweets, dessert, and so on; and to sustain the mockery it is requisite that we should converse, because for two-thirds of the whole time there are sveral domestics present. Well, you may therefore suppose that under such ungenial circumstances it was quite a godsend to his lordship to have a topic ready at hand to discourse upon, instead of being compelled to search after subjects that might answer the purpose, as the French say, *pour faire les frais de la conversation*. So just now, as I was observing, his lordship gave me a verbose and elaborate detail of the examination of Leonard Percival."

"And the conclusion to which he drew your ladyship," said I, quivering with impatience to undeceive her, "was hostile to the young man?"

"Undoubtedly," returned my noble mistress.

"Then, my lady," said I, "you are wrong. Leonard Percival is innocent! The foulest perjury has been brought to bear against him. Lord Harlesdon himself is so far deceived; and yet, on the other hand, by a strange sort of inconsistency which I cannot rightly understand, he has lent himself to a plot for carrying off poor Ellen Kirkland, no doubt that she may be forced into a marriage with that odious Jacob Harper."

"Mary, what mean you?" asked her ladyship, with more seriousness than amazement. "I know very well that you have too much good sense to be carried away with flighty ideas; and I feel persuaded that you must have some deeper reason than mere conjecture for the grave assertions you have just made."

I forthwith proceeded to acquaint her ladyship with all that had occurred—how I had swooned behind the curtain, and how when I came to myself I was necessitated to remain a listener there. She heard me to the end without uttering a word; and when I had done speaking she reflected profoundly for some minutes. "What you have told me," she at length said, "throws a new light upon circumstances which bear on my own case. It is clear that John Morley did not, in the first instance, communicate direct with his lordship in respect to my unhappy connexion with Clavering: but he betrayed the secret first of all to Jacob Harper. Then was it that Jacob Harper must have spoken to Lord Harlesdon, and his lordship must have employed Morley to keep watch upon Clavering himself. Hence the affair of the arbour. And now, Mary, as Lord Harlesdon hugs the secret of his dishonour—will not suffer it to be blazoned forth throughout the world—but nevertheless means to wreak some hidden, yet not the less cruel vengeance upon me—he is compelled to bribe these wretches to keep the secret which they themselves were the very first to impart to him. Alas! that his lordship is spreading some pitfall at my feet, I do indeed fear: for during the last few days, since all our guests took their leave, he has suddenly ceased to hurl at me those frequent darts of bitter sarcasm and withering satire which, though disguised in words, pierced with a pang as lancinating as barbed arrows. Depend upon it, then, his vengeance is taking another course—his tactics are changed!"

"Oh, dear lady!" do not terrify yourself with these forebodings," I exclaimed. "Nothing in the plot which is now going on can possibly regard you. It is for the carrying off of Ellen Kirkland that the chaise is to be in readiness; and she is the girl to be enticed to the spot."

"No doubt," said Lady Harlesdon. "But much that you have been telling me so far regarded myself as to fix my thoughts upon my own unhappy fate. However," she exclaimed, as if suddenly throwing off her own despondency in order to think energetically how she could be of service to others, "there is work to be done to-night, Mary—and that too as soon as circumstances will permit. From all you have said it is clear that Leonard Percival is indeed innocent, and that a plot is in existence to immolate poor Ellen to the passion of that bad man Jacob Harper. Now, it will be useless to make any appeal to his lordship on behalf of justice and of mercy. I am not in a position to ask a favour at his hands; nor indeed can the subject be mentioned at all without the avowal that you overheard the conversation in the library."

"Then what is to be done, my lady?" I asked.

"Does not your ingenuity suggest anything, Mary?"

"Ah!" I exclaimed, "if we could but afford Leonard the means of escaping from the persecution of his enemies who have sworn to ruin him, he might hasten away with his betrothed to some far-off part of the country, where their hands could be joined in matrimony and he would acquire a legal right to protect her!"

"This is precisely the course which I should have suggested," said Lady Harlesdon. "I volunteered one hundred guineas before dinner to accomplish their happiness. The amount is now at your disposal. Fetch me my writing-desk from yonder table."

I did so: and when her ladyship opened the desk, she first took out a large package of letters, the very sight of which suddenly convulsed her bosom with a profound sigh. I guessed full well the cause of her emotion: these letters were from Sir Aubrey Clavering! She said not a word, but drew forth a quantity of gold and several bank-notes which were lying loose inside the desk, tossing about with true aristocratic negligence.

"Here are sixty pounds in bank-notes and forty in gold," she said. "Wrap it up, Mary, in a sheet of paper, so as to keep it secure; and now let us think of how Leonard Percival's escape is to be accomplished."

"Ah," said I, as I carefully enveloped the money and placed it by my side on the sofa, "that is indeed the difficulty! Nevertheless, I not only undertake the enterprise, but do not despair of being enabled to accomplish it. It cannot however be attempted until a later hour—perhaps not until the house is quiet and the servants have retired to rest. But we shall see. I do not believe that any one will be set to keep a watch in the vicinage of the stable, as Jacob Harper seems to entertain the fullest reliance in the security of the loft as a prison. The question will be how I am to procure the keys of the stable: for I dare say the key of the loft is on the same bunch."

"I happen to know that such is the fact," observed Lady Harlesdon; "because all the keys of the out-houses are invariably entrusted to the head-groom, with as much formal precision as the seals of office to a Minister of State."

"And that head-groom is now John Morley," said I.

"To whom," added her ladyship inquiringly, "you have such a repugnance that you could devise no plan to get into conversation with him and endeavour to ascertain where he keeps the keys?"

"I scarcely think that will be possible," said I. "But I will go down into the servants'-hall presently and trust to the chapter of accidents. Morley has his plot in hand, whatever it may be; and he may not perhaps be in the way. But, Ah! my dear lady," I exclaimed, "you must permit me to go at once and warn poor Ellen Kirkland of the danger which menaces her. Besides, if she have already heard of her lover's arrest it would be cruel not to impart solace to her soul as speedily as possible; and that solace it is in my power to give through your ladyship's kindness."

"But it is pitch dark, Mary," urged my noble mistress. "Are you not afraid to venture across the fields at such an hour and in such complete loneliness?"

"Oh, no, dear lady!" I cried, seeing that the permission was already accorded if I chose to accept it. "Besides, for such a purpose I would face any danger."

"After daring the horrors of St. Giles's vilest dens," said Lady Harlesdon, patting me kindly on the face as she thought of the recovery of her child, "you are not indeed likely, my dear Mary, to be daunted by the phantom-dangers of darkness and loneliness."

"Then I shall go!" was my exclamation, as I started from the sofa. "It is now half-past nine. In an hour I shall be back again. It will then be half-past ten—plenty of time to peer about in search of the keys down below."

I was hurrying from the room when Lady Harlesdon, catching sight of the money upon the sofa, exclaimed, "Will you not take this with you?"

"Yes:" then as a sudden thought struck me, I said, "No—it will be better that I should not take so large a sum with me at such an hour. Indeed it will be safer to give it to Leonard Percival, whose escape I am resolved to effect. I shall leave the money here until my return:"—and I placed it under the cushion of the sofa.

I then quitted her ladyship's chamber and ascended to my own room, which had two doors, one opening from the nursery and the other from the passage, so that I could enter it without being observed by Jemima, the nursery-door of communication being fortunately closed at the time. To envelop myself in my bonnet and cloak was but the work of a moment; and stealing forth again, I descended the back staircase and got unperceived out of the house.

CHAPTER XXX.

MY EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF THE LOVERS.

THE night was indeed pitch dark; for the moon had not yet risen. It was however still a hard frost, and the ground was like marble as in the morning. Light as my steps were, their tread nevertheless sounded sufficiently on the beaten pathway through the park to make me pause more than once with the apprehension that I was being followed: but when at length I convinced myself that this was mere fancy on my part, I sped onward without halting, and in a very short time reached Mrs. Baker's cottage.

The shutters were closed, and a light glimmered feebly through the crevices. I knocked at the door, which was soon opened by the old dame; and the first glimpse that I caught of her countenance by the candle which she carried in her hand, showed me that grief was already an inmate of that humble abode. Indeed so woe-begone were Mrs. Baker's looks, that even the expression of amazement which rose thereon on beholding me was comparatively faint; and I thought at once that the very worst was most probably known. She was about to open the door of her little room to give me admittance, when I checked her; and catching her by the hand, detained her in the passage for a moment, while I asked in a low whisper, "Does Ellen know all?"

"Yes—all!" returned the dame, likewise in a very subdued voice.

"But how?" I asked.

"One of the gamekeeper's men called here as he went home an hour ago, and told me what had happened," rejoined Mrs. Baker.

"What! one of the villains who perjured themselves?" I said indignantly; for my blood boiled at the idea that an accomplice in Jacob Harper's black wickedness should be the very first to come and plant a poignant dagger in the hearts of those on whom the blow was to rebound. "But where is Ellen?" I asked.

The dame forthwith opened the door of her little room; and there, seated near the fire, with her elbows on her knees and her hands supporting her face—her long brown hair hanging down all dishevelled—sat Ellen Kirkland. She did not move as I entered; she did not indeed seem to be aware that her grandmother had quitted the chair opposite, or that a visitress had come. All her faculties, all her senses, all her ideas seemed absorbed in the tremendous grief that filled her soul. I felt a sad, sad tightening at the heart as I beheld this spectacle of utter woe; and the tears started forth upon my eye-lashes.

"Nelly dear," said the dame, in a low plaintive tone, as she placed her hand gently upon her granddaughter's shoulder; "here is your new friend come to see you—Mary Price, to whom you took such a liking."

"Ah! some one from the Park?" ejaculated

Ellen, with a startling abruptness: then lifting her head and pushing back the cloud of her hair, she looked up at me—but heavens! with a countenance so wan—oh! so wan, so pale, so woe-begone, that its very aspect struck me as with a sudden shock.

"Good God, Ellen!" I exclaimed, "how you have suffered!"—and throwing my arms round her neck, I embraced her again and again. "But cheer up! You have friends—there is hope—everything may yet be well!"

"Oh! you are an angel, Mary, sent to console me!" cried the poor creature, with a sudden thrill, as if the revulsion of feeling which brought back hope to her breast was electrifying to a degree: then tears came to her relief, and she began to weep plentifully.

"Let her tears flow, my dear girl," said the dame, gently drawing me back; and I at once understood that the proceeding was prudent, and that immense would be the relief afforded to that poor suffering heart by this flood of weeping.

"Yes, dear Ellen—Lady Harlesdon herself is your friend," said I, when after the expiration of two or three minutes I judged that there was no longer need to wait: and I then proceeded to explain enough to make her understand that everything would be done with a view to accomplish her lover's escape and enable him to join her with a sum of money which Lady Harlesdon's bounty had already provided. I also told her that there was a plot against herself, to entice her to some place where a chaise would be in waiting at midnight, and to carry her off with a view to her ultimate compulsion into marriage with Jacob Harper.

I did not however give all these explanations without many interruptions that were natural enough on the part of the excited and impatient Ellen. She wished to know why, if I had proofs

of Harper's perjury and Leonard's innocence, they were not adduced at the examination—why Lady Harlesdon did not use her influence with her lord to procure Leonard's release, instead of devising a secret means for his escape—and how it had been found out that there was this dark plot to carry herself off? To all these questions I was obliged to give such answers which, without disclosing the entire facts (as they would have involved Lady Harlesdon's honour) proved satisfactory to Ellen; and in a short time she regained both hope and confidence. Not that she had for a moment mistrusted me in anything that I said or promised: but the cruel weight of calamity and the evidences of so much black treachery had rendered her mistrustful of destiny itself, and made her doubt whether it were possible that fortune could ever smile again for her.

"Ah! my dear Mary," she said, when at length re-assured and full of hope, "you know not what an hour of unutterable misery I have passed since the distracting tidings were brought to our door. I thought I should go mad! It seemed to me impossible that I could endure such a misfortune without being utterly crushed beneath its weight. At first I felt myself impelled to rush to the Park and demand that my Leonard should be set free—or at least that I might be permitted to see him, console him, and assure him of my unalterable love! But——"

"It was I who restrained her," said the grandmother, taking up the thread of Ellen's distressing narrative. "I told her that she would not be permitted to see Leonard—that she would only meet with insult from the very wretches who had sworn away his liberty, and whom she would be certain to meet either at the mansion or on her way thither. In a word, I implored her not to go forth this night. I had a presentiment of danger. I knew full well that this blow was not struck to get rid of Leonard only, but to enable the villain Harper to carry out his designs in respect to her. But it was with the utmost difficulty I could prevent poor Nell from flying in frenzy and distraction to the Park."

"Oh! I should have been wrong—I should have been ungrateful, not to have followed your advice!" exclaimed Ellen, addressing her aged relative in the most affectionate manner. "But my mind was made up, Mary," she continued, turning towards me, "to have started off at four o'clock in the morning to walk to Derby, so as to be at the prison-gate in time to behold him enter the dreadful place, that at least I might have had the mournful satisfaction of giving him that proof of my affection!"

Again she melted into tears; and my own flowed freely. But I assured her that she would not have to walk to Derby gaol—that she would be spared that sainted pilgrimage of love—for that I was resolved to effect Leonard's escape, come what might. She embraced me with enthusiasm—poured forth her gratitude in the most touching and fervid manner—and besought me to express the same on her account to Lady Harlesdon.

"Yes, my dear friend, I will do so," said I. "But I must now hasten away. Recollect that some treachery is to be practised in order to entice you out of this hut to-night. Be upon your guard! Let Mrs. Baker answer the door if any one should come, and say that you are gone away. Indeed I am not sure but that it will be better for you to leave at once, in case force should be used to carry you off. Tell me, what is your own opinion—which do you prefer? I presume that whithersoever you go, your good grandmother will accompany you and Mr. Percival?"

"Yes—not for worlds would I be separated from her who has supplied to me the place of a mother!" cried Ellen, throwing her arms about the dame's neck: then after a few moments' reflection, she said, "Yes, it will be better that we leave at once: for, Oh! if force should be used to carry me away, what would poor Leonard do when on escaping and coming in the hope of embracing his Ellen, he found her gone? Oh, it would drive him mad!"

"Make ready then your little bundle of necessaries, both of you," said I; "and be off at once. Only tell me where Mr. Leonard is to join you."

"There is a worthy couple's cottage a mile and a half hence," said Mrs. Baker: "the Morrisons' I mean, Nelly," she added, turning to her granddaughter.

"Yes, yes—we shall be welcome there," exclaimed Ellen: "we will proceed thither without delay. Mary, my dear friend, tell Leonard to join us at the Morrisons'. He will know where: and may heaven give you success in your kind, your generous purpose! Dearest girl—my more than sister—I have not words wherewith to express how much I feel—how much I love you!"

The affectionate Ellen embraced me tenderly, as did also her worthy relative; and the next moment I flitted across the threshold and began to retrace my way to the Park. A terrible sense of loneliness seized upon me on thus quitting the inmates of the cottage and finding myself in the fields again: but shaking off the dispiriting influence, I sought a source of self-congratulation in having accomplished my journey to the cottage unmolested, and in having effected an arrangement which I had no doubt would place Ellen beyond the reach of danger and enable Leonard to make sure of finding her at the Morrisons house.

The reader will perceive that I had made up my mind to effect the young man's release, and that I all along treated it as something certain to be accomplished. This I did, not only because I was resolved to leave no stone unturned in order to achieve my purpose, but likewise perhaps because I did not choose to admit to myself that there was any chance of failure. I remembered how cheeringly I had been sustained by a similar degree of confidence on the memorable night when I penetrated with Mad Tommy into the lion's den in St. Giles's; and though not naturally of a sanguine temperament, I now buoyed myself up with a similar degree of confidence. Yet by a strange inconsistency I was occupied during the entire walk—or I might almost call it run—back from the cottage to the Park, an interval of nearly a quarter of an hour, in wondering what aids the chapter of accidents would throw up in my behalf.

On reaching the mansion I contrived to re-enter as unperceived as I had sallied forth, and proceeded straight up to Lady Harlesdon's chamber. There I threw off my bonnet and cloak, and told my kind mistress all that had taken place at

the cottage. She was much pleased to hear that Ellen and her grandmother had quitted the hut and proceeded elsewhere: for, as her ladyship observed, if it were resolved to carry her off, force would be adopted should treachery fail.

I was detained at the cottage longer than I had calculated; and it was now nearly eleven o'clock. The time was come to manœuvre for the accomplishment of Leonard Percival's deliverance. Her ladyship declared that she should not retire to rest until she had seen the result; and I therefore promised to return to her presently. Being in haste to enter upon my undertaking, I quite forgot to take the money with me, and left it where it was underneath the cushion of the sofa. Descending to the servants' hall, I found that as it was Christmas season, they were sitting round the fire drinking mulled wine and spiced ale; and I was of course asked to join the party—for I must say without vanity that they all liked me, notwithstanding I was so very little down stairs amongst them, and on the other hand was so much with her ladyship. But then they knew that I was no spy upon their actions, as a favourite servant too often is; and that I was always willing to speak a good word to Lady Harlesdon in favour of any one.

The first glance that I threw around was to ascertain whether John Morley was present; and sure enough, there he was amongst the menservants with a large tumbler of ale in his hand. He spoke to me in a civil and proper manner; and I answered him with just as much civility in return as was necessary to avoid showing that I entertained such a deeply-rooted aversion towards him.

The servants were all talking of Leonard Percival when I thus joined them; and the same topic was continued. It is not requisite to chronicle the opinions which were uttered upon the subject: suffice it to say that they were not favourable to the prisoner, although I could not discover that a single one spoke a word eulogistic of Jacob Harper. As for John Morley, he said very little indeed; and methought once or twice that he appeared the least thing fidgetty, as if the topic were not altogether agreeable to him—or as if he did not quite like my presence in the servants' hall. Presently, when he had drained his glass of ale, he rose and said, "Well, it's rather a nuisance to have to turn out such a cold night as this."

"Why, where are you going to, John, at this hour?" asked one of the servants. "It's past eleven."

"I am going over to sleep at Farmer Jones's to-night," answered Morley in a careless manner, which I knew full well to be assumed: "because he's got to send in a lot of hay and straw the first thing to-morrow morning, and his lordship thought it best that I should go and see it first, as Farmer Jones has got two sorts and he might send in the worst."

"Well, take another drop to keep the cold out."

"So I will. Here's a health to you all!"—then having drained the tumbler which the under-butler had filled for him Morley said, "By the by, the keys of the outhouses are in my stable-jacket hanging up in the passage; and as Jacob Harper may perhaps come in the morning before I am back, to take Leonard Percival over to Derby, you will know where the keys are."

"All right," said the under-butler, to whom this information was addressed.

John Morley then put on his great coat, his hat, and a pair of thick gloves—lighted a cigar—and sallied forth.

I sat in a quiver of agitation during the brief but important colloquy which had just taken place, but to which I pretended to be paying not the slightest attention. I was heartily glad when Morley had taken his departure: for it was now comparatively plain sailing with me in the execution of my plans. I allowed about ten minutes to elapse ere I moved from my seat: then alleging some excuse for my temporary absence, I quitted the servants' hall, taking care to shut the door behind me. A light burnt in the passage which separated the room I had just left from the kitchen; and to a long row of pegs were suspended various garments belonging to the male domestics. Morley's stable-jacket was amongst them; and in one of the pockets I found the bunch of keys. Another moment, and I was passing out of a back door into the yard. This I traversed light as the fawn, and gained the stables. None of the underlings were about—all was dark—and without interruption or hindrance did I open the door. Passing into the stable, I took the keys with me, closing the door. To grope my way to the ladder leading up into the loft was the work of a few moments; and having found it, I ascended with some degree of caution: for a pitchy darkness enveloped me—and for obvious reasons I had not dared bring a light. I felt the trap-door which closed the aperture at the head of the ladder, and groped for the padlock. This I found; and after trying three or four of the smaller keys, at length found one to fit. I lifted the trap-door, and said, "Mr. Percival, are you here?"

"Ah! who calls? and a female voice too!" he responded, in the hushed tone of sudden curiosity and suspense.

"It is a friend," was my answer; "one who has come to deliver you."

"I knew it was a kind voice that spoke," he joyfully replied. "But——"

"We have not a moment to spare," I interrupted. "You remember the nurse-maid for whom you so civilly opened the gate in the field this morning?"

"Yes—and it is you! I recognise your voice now."

"Well, I know all—I have seen your Ellen——"

"O heavens!" he exclaimed; and I heard him start convulsively. "Has she learnt this dreadful calamity?"

"She has heard it—but she is re-assured. Of course she knows your innocence, as I do—and as Lady Harlesdon does."

"Lady Harlesdon?"

"Pray do not interrupt me. Your enemies are resolved to ruin you. There was even a plan devised to carry off your Ellen——"

"Ah, that villain Harper!" ejaculated Leonard.

"Yes—but all is frustrated," I hastened to reply. "Mrs. Baker and Ellen have left the cot-

tage and gone to the Morrisons, where you are to join them."

"Oh! you are an angel of goodness," cried Leonard. "But my character?" he immediately added in a mournful voice. "I dare not fly—it would stamp my guilt——O heaven! what am I to do?"

"You will do no good by remaining here," was my prompt rejoinder. "To-morrow morning, before daybreak a cart will come to take you to prison. Then indeed will you be branded with infamy: and who knows what will become of your Ellen? She may be driven to despair—her heart may be broken!"

"Poor Ellen! But if you are assured of my innocence, can you not prove it? You beheld all that took place at the gate in the field. Oh, Miss Price—for I know your name—do consider how dear to me is my character!"

"Everything is risked by this delay, Mr. Percival," said I, with the impatience of growing terror. "At any moment some one may come—I may be missed—inquired for! Will you believe me if, without pausing to enter into explanations, I assure you the plans of your enemies are so well laid that no evidence I can give could possibly help you? You must escape—you must fly away to some distant part, and obtain a legal right to protect your Ellen from that bad man Harper. Some day or another your innocence will be made apparent."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Leonard, with the excited suddenness of a man adopting the only alternative suitable to a desperate position. "I will follow your advice—I will fly! But I am bound hand and foot, and cannot move."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, frightened by this announcement, which seemed to threaten more delay and fresh difficulty: "I had forgotten. Have you no knife about you?"

"No—my pockets were rifled by the gamekeepers. There is sure to be one in the stable, if you knew where to search for it."

"Stay! I know where the groom's cupboard is:"—for I had been in the stables once before to show the children the horses when we first arrived at the Park. I accordingly descended the ladder—groped my way to the cupboard—succeeded in finding it—and felt amongst its contents for what I wanted. Fortunately, my search was not in vain: I found a knife, and hastened up the ladder again into the loft. Guided by Percival's voice, I approached him and at once began carefully to cut the cord which bound his wrists. But as it was pitch dark, and I was nervous and trembling with alarm lest some one should enter and discover what was going on, I inflicted a gash upon my thumb, the sudden pain of which made me cry out.

"What in heaven's name is the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing! I think I have cut myself with the knife: but it may be only fancy. It does not hurt now:"—and I continued my task.

"Miss Price, if you have really hurt yourself I shall be deeply, deeply concerned," he said.

"Oh! I can assure you it is nothing," I rejoined. "There now! You can do the rest."

I had severed the cords which fastened his arms, and I gave him the knife, that he might cut away the rope from his ankles. While he was thus employed, I descended from the loft; and during the few moments that elapsed ere he joined me in the stable below, I bound my handkerchief round my thumb which was smarting very much; and though I could see nothing, I felt that I had cut it severely.

"Now, are you ready?" said I, as Leonard stood by my side: then, a sudden thought striking me, I exclaimed, "But, good heavens! I have forgotten your money."

"My money?" he cried in a tone of astonishment.

"Yes. Have I not told you that Lady Harlesdon is your friend? She has placed a hundred pounds at your disposal——"

"Oh, what generosity!" he exclaimed.

"Her ladyship does not do things by halves," I immediately answered: "and she is doing her best to atone for his lordship's injustice towards you. You cannot get on without money: Ellen and her grandmother could not travel on foot. But what is to be done? It will take me five minutes to run and fetch the money—besides the chance of being detained by any unforeseen circumstance."

"Oh! I will fly without it," said Percival. "You have already done so much for me——"

"Yes—but I must not leave my work incomplete. Now listen," I continued in a quick tone. "It is dangerous for you to remain here on the premises: you must hasten away at once. But you know the stile in the road leading into that very field where you opened the gate for me this morning? Well, you must go and wait for me *there*. I will be as quick as I can: but if I should be a minute or two longer than it might seem I ought, do you wait—be sure to wait!"

"Miss Price, this kindness on your part——"

"Not another word, I beseech you! And now pray depart. In a quarter of an hour I will be at the stile."

With these words I made him issue forth from the stable; and while he was gliding away into the surrounding darkness, I took the precaution to lock the trap-door of the loft again, and also the stable-door, so that if any of the underlings should by chance happen to have occasion to enter the stable that night, there would be little chance of Leonard's escape being discovered. This precaution I took, inasmuch as it was desirable for him to have as many hours as possible to get clear out of the neighbourhood of Harlesdon Park.

Elate with the success which had thus far attended my proceedings, the most important incident of which was consummated, I returned into the house. Having replaced the keys in the stable-jacket, I hastened up to Lady Harlesdon's chamber again, and in a few brief words told her all that I done.

"I am truly delighted, my dear Mary," she said. "But what is the matter with your hand?"

"Ah, I remember!" said I: for in the hurry and excitement of my feelings I had quite forgotten the cut inflicted by the knife.

I now took off the handkerchief—for it was deeply tinged with blood: and I found, as I had suspected, that I had cut my thumb somewhat severely. Lady Harlesdon, with characteristic kindness, hastily bound her own cambric handkerchief

tightly over the wound; and slipping on my bonnet and cloak, which, as the reader will remember, I had left in her ladyship's room, I secured the money about my person and once more sallied forth from the mansion.

So quick was the rate at which I sped towards the place of appointment, that I had no leisure for much reflection. The moon was now shining brightly—the weather had altogether changed—and it was a clear but ice cold night. The presence of the silver planet aided the celerity of my pace; and I soon reached the stile. Leonard was there. Enough has already been said of his generous character and good disposition to enable the reader to imagine how fervent was the gratitude which he poured forth for all that I had done and for Lady Harlesdon's kindness.

"Miss Price," he said, taking my hand and pressing it with honest warmth, "if ever I can teach my tongue to breathe to heaven one prayer more earnest and heartfelt than another, it will be on your behalf. May God Almighty bless you!—and if ever the day should come and occasion should serve that I may testify my gratitude—— Ah! my feelings overpower me!"

"Mr. Percival," said I, weeping also; for I beheld the tears glistening in the moonlight upon his manly cheeks; "I know all that you would say. That you may be happy with your Ellen, is my fervid wish. Tell her that I hope to see her again."

"And she will embrace you, when next you meet, as if you were the dearest of sisters. Good bye. Once more, God bless you!"

"Good bye, Mr. Percival."

Away he sped across the fields; and I hastened to retrace my steps up the road towards another stile leading into the park. But I had not advanced many yards when I heard footsteps approaching down the road; and I ran forward in the hope of reaching the stile and getting into the park before encountering the persons advancing, whoever they might be. For that there was more than one I could not only judge by the trampling of the steps on the hard ground, but also by hearing voices speak—though I could not distinguish what was said, nor did I particularly note the tones themselves. The two men, however—for two there were—reached the stile at the same instant as myself; and then, as the moonbeams shone full upon their countenances, to my indescribable annoyance I recognized one to be that of John Morley. The other man was a perfect stranger to me, and looked like a low kind of hostler.

I say that I experienced annoyance; and this was natural at being thus encountered, away from home, in such a place, and at such an hour of the night. But with that feeling there was blended very little alarm: for I did not apprehend anything on my own account. It instantaneously struck me that Morley was waiting in the hope of being able to carry off Ellen Kirkland—for it was now just midnight, and I had not forgotten what I had heard in the library relative to *the post-chaise being in readiness*, and *enticing the girl to the spot*. Recollecting all this, I experienced, apart from my feeling of annoyance, a sudden thrill of satisfaction to think that Ellen was safely removed from the clutches of her enemies: but at the same time I wondered why it was that Jacob Harper himself was not now with John Morley to help him, as it was for his special behoof that Ellen was to be carried off.

Such were the feelings and thoughts which seized upon me during the first moments that I thus found myself at the stile face to face with John Morley and the hostler-looking person: but the reader may judge of my surprise, and also of the sudden misgiving which struck me with a bewilderment, as Morley said, "Well, young Miss, so you have come to the appointment? But it isn't me you expected to meet!"

"Appointment!—you!" I ejaculated: and my heart turned sick with augmenting terror.

"Aye, *me!*" answered Morley, with a leering grin. "Now then, Bill," he immediately added in a significant manner to his companion.

Thereupon they seized me so suddenly that I had not an opportunity of even attempting to escape; and in the cruel revulsion of feeling which took place at this terrible calamity—for a portion of the truth had flashed to my comprehension—I fainted.

When I came to my senses I was inside a post-chaise, the windows of which were drawn up: but through the glass the moonlight shone clearly enough to show me that I had a companion—and this companion was John Morley!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE POST-CHAISE.

YES—the truth had indeed flashed to my mind at the very instant that the death-sickness of the swoon came over me: and now it was all confirmed! Most naturally had I fancied that the plot of which I had caught an inkling, was to carry off Ellen Kirkland. That the post-chaise was intended for her; and that she was *the girl* to be enticed to the spot, I had all along felt convinced. Never once for a single moment had even the faintest glimmering of a suspicion struck me that I was the object of this vile conspiracy: no, not until, on encountering Morley and the hostler at the stile, the former had addressed me in those words about "coming to an appointment but not expecting to meet him"—words which had instantaneously opened my eyes to the astounding fact that after all *I* myself was "the girl to be enticed to the spot!"

"Well, Miss Price," said Morley, when he found that I had regained my consciousness: "so you have been outwitted?"

"Tell me what is the meaning of this?" said I in feverish anxiety.

"You will know all in good time," he responded. "It's better that I should not answer too many questions."

"Too many!" I repeated bitterly. "I have only asked you one. Do for heaven's sake give me a reply."

"I can't. All I can say is that no harm will befall you."

"No—I do not fear that you would murder me——"

"Murder!" he repeated quickly, and methought with so sudden a start that I was instantaneously

seized with a mortal terror—and the fear which the moment before I had declared I did *not* experience, now held me in its hideous grasp.

I endeavoured to speak but could not: for this terror which had seized upon me was horribly confirmed, as I beheld the strange and ghastly expression which Morley's countenance at the instant wore.

"Who the deuce thinks of murdering you, you little fool?" he said in a singularly altered tone, half growling, half gruffly impatient: then with a sudden laugh, which seemed to me unnaturally forced, he added, "Don't get such stupid things into your head. If I meant what you have hinted at, I shouldn't be carrying you away in a post-chaise."

This remark reassured me, notwithstanding the suspicious strangeness of Morley's look and manner; and as I felt the blood begin to flow once more after an ice-like stagnation in my veins, I flung a quick glance through the window on each side to see what road the chaise was pursuing. Had there been a house near, I should have dashed my hand through the pane of glass and shrieked for succour. But the road was utterly lonely; and I could not distinguish a single feature of the scenery in the moonlight, that was at all familiar to me.

"You must not think of escaping," said Morley, evidently penetrating my thoughts. "If we pass by a house, or through a village, you may depend upon it I should hold your hands to prevent you from lowering or breaking the windows; and if any persons journeying along were attracted by a scream or cry from your lips, and were to stop the chaise, I should have a tale ready to satisfy them."

"A tale?" I mechanically echoed.

"Yes—to be sure," was his immediate rejoinder. "You don't think I am going to let you slip through my fingers after all the trouble I have taken to get hold of you? Suppose any one interfered in your behalf, what is easier than for me to swear you are my wife or sister, that I caught eloping with some fellow? or else that you are a poor crazed creature that I am taking off to a lunatic asylum?"

"Heaven help me!" I murmured, struck by the conviction that every species of artifice would be had recourse to in order to consummate the villanous treachery of which I was now the victim.

"Ah! it was a precious clever stratagem of mine—wasn't it?" he continued, with a subdued chuckle: "and you nibbled greedy enough at the bait. Only let a young gal know that her lover is waiting for her, and off she goes to meet him without considering for a moment the unseemliness of the hour——But why do you look at me in such a wild astonished manner?"

"Because you are speaking in enigmas," I answered. "What stratagem do you allude to?" I asked, my curiosity painfully excited, inasmuch as I saw full well that some cruel trick had been played, but of which I was altogether unconscious.

"Do you mean to tell me that you didn't come down to the stile in the road just now in consequence of the note you got?"—and he looked me fixedly in the face.

"I received no note," was my response.

"Come, this is fiddlestick nonsense," he exclaimed angrily. "You can't make me believe I am quite a fool: but I certainly did not think that you were such a deceptive puss as you are——For if you didn't get the note what the deuce was it that brought you out at such an hour, and at the very place named for the appointment?"

I made no answer. Indeed I felt that my conduct would be liable to some evil construction if I persisted in declaring that I was not abroad at such an hour in consequence of the trick which had evidently formed a part of John Morley's treacherous proceedings.

"There!—you see," he continued, in a sort of triumph, "you can't look me any longer in the face and tell me that you didn't nibble at the bait so adroitly thrown out. The note was written in a very nice hand—in fact, by one quite as able to write such a note as Eustace Quentin himself."

I started involuntarily.

"Ah! young Miss, that name was like an electric shock, wasn't it? Why, of course I knew very well you would fall into the snare. That hostler fellow you saw with me in the road just now, took the note himself up to the Park, and gave the ball-porter a guinea to slip it into your hand unknown to any one else. That must have been at about half-past eleven, or twenty minutes to twelve; and very soon after the hostler came back and joined me in the road again, you met us at the stile."

I said not a word. Crushed and almost broken-hearted at the ramification of treacheries whereof I found myself the victim, I could not command my feelings sufficiently for deliberate reflection. My brain seemed to be in a whirl; and thus did several minutes elapse, during which silence prevailed.

"When I saw you come down into the servants' hall this evening," resumed Morley, at length breaking this silence, "I began to be half afraid that you suspected something, and wanted to let me see that you were not to be duped: because it was such an unusual thing for you to come amongst the servants and sit down so familiarly with them. I suppose you know they call you 'lady-like Miss Price;' and yet I must say they all speak very well of you. However, I soon saw by your manner that you really only came amongst them for a little chat; and as you did not even seem to notice when I went out, I felt certain you suspected nothing."

Again he paused; and my ideas began to grow more collected, and my feelings more composed For I could not help remarking that though Morley spoke with a certain impudent flippancy, which indeed was his general manner, yet that he did not attempt the slightest rudeness towards me. The post-chaise had but one seat; and he was therefore placed next to me: but while I drew myself as much into my own corner as I possibly could, so as to avoid contact with an individual whom I alike feared and loathed, he made no unbecoming approach towards me; and up to this moment at least his conduct offered a kind of guarantee against insult. Then, it was not on his own account that he was carrying me off? Could it be for the purpose of consummating some new phase in the vengeance which Lord Harlesdon was wreaking upon his wife? or was I now included in that plan of vengeance? For a moment it struck me that Sir Aubrey Clavering was at the bottom of this outrage. But the idea scarcely seemed probable: for Lady Harlesdon had warned Sir Aubrey of Morley's traitorous conduct in betraying them to his lordship, and it appeared most likely that it was in consequence of being discharged by Clavering that Morley had been taken into the service of Lord Harlesdon. And yet

from the time that her ladyship had given Clavering that warning until the moment when Morley came to enter his lordship's service, *several weeks had elapsed;* and in the interval what had Morley been doing? Had he made his peace with the Baronet, and remained with him during that time?—and had he only entered Lord Harlesdon's service in order the more effectually to consummate new treacheries? If so, might he not still be acting in respect to me on behalf of the Baronet, and with the full connivance and approval of Lord Harlesdon?

All these queries did my imagination suggest: but I knew not how to settle my thoughts upon any particular hypothesis, so as to account for the present proceeding. At length, summoning up my courage, and considerably reassured by Morley's forbearing conduct towards me, I said, "Will you not relieve me of suspense and tell me what is my present destination?"

"You see," answered Morley, "I am of course deuced well paid for what I am doing, and have therefore every inducement to act in strict accordance with my instructions. A part of these instructions was that you were not to know where you were being taken, or for what purpose, or anything about it. But there is perhaps one little condition upon which I might venture to break through these instructions."

He paused as if for a reply; but the sudden change which had taken place in his tone and manner as he gave utterance to these last words, made me suspect that his meaning was not altogether such as would prove agreeable to myself.

"You don't answer me," he continued; "and so I suppose I must explain myself fully. You recollect, perhaps, something that I said to you in the arbour that night—about two months ago——"

"Enough!" I ejaculated. "I will not ask any favour at your hands, and therefore you need not stipulate any conditions:"—and again I glanced through the windows to see whether house or hamlet were near; for at any risk I resolved to cry for help when opportunity should serve. But the chaise was still rolling rapidly along a lonely road, and I had not the slightest idea of the direction it was taking.

"Now, I do not want to treat you with anything but respect," resumed Morley, though in a somewhat hesitating manner: "but if you would only listen to what I have to say, it's just probable you might alter your mind a bit with regard to me. Suppose I make you an honourable offer, and you agree—of course I would tell you everything at once. Well, as you are still silent, I suppose I am to go on? You must know that I am to have a certain sum of money if I take you safe and sound, treating you with becoming respect, to a certain place. Suppose, then, that you are taken there, and I receive the money? it won't prevent me from helping you to escape again as soon afterwards as possible; and if you will agree that on assisting you to escape in such a manner you will go right off to church with me and become plain and honest Mrs. Morley at once—why, in that case we can come to a full understanding at the present moment and ratify our bargain with a kiss."

"You were enjoined," said I, controlling my indignation, "to treat me with becoming respect. Did you not say so?"

"I did," he answered, not knowing exactly what to think of my tone and manner.

"Then you will be so good as to follow out your instructions to the very letter," said I; "and I would sooner—ten thousand times sooner—suffer all the torture of suspense relative to my present destination and the fate that may be in store for me, than purchase that knowledge by any compromise with you."

Morley made no answer; but I saw that he bit his lip with vexation. He then folded his arms over his breast, and looking downward, continued silent. The moon was still shining brightly; and onward the chaise rolled, the road continuing as lonely as ever. It evidently was not a highway, but some bye-road—though in what direction it led, whether north, east, south, or west, I could form no idea. An hour at least had elapsed since I awoke to consciousness inside this vehicle; and I now began to think that if our journey were to continue much farther, it would be necessary to change horses. In this case I imagined that I should have an opportunity of imploring assistance: and I was settling in my mind what I should say—how I should enforce my appeal—and likewise how disprove any of the allegations which Morley had threatened to make if I did clamour for help, when all of a sudden the chaise turned into a narrow lane, and in a couple of minutes stopped in front of a small house standing about fifty yards back.

It was a white house, having a garden filled with evergreens in front. Lights were shining through the windows; and the moment the post-chaise stopped the front door opened; and two females, issuing forth, came hurrying down to the garden-gate.

"Now," said Morley, as he put down the window on that side, and, thrusting forth his arm, opened the chaise-door: "you have arrived."

The next instant the two females—one of whom was an elderly woman, looking like a housekeeper, and the other a younger person of about five-and-twenty and having the appearance of a servant—came up to the door of the post-chaise and in respectful terms begged me to alight.

For a moment I hesitated what course to pursue: but the next instant I stepped forth, and at once addressing myself to the postilion, exclaimed, "I demand and implore your protection. I am carried off against my will. This outrage——"

"It's no use, Miss, talking to him," interrupted Morley: "he is too well paid to interfere."

I felt that this was evidently the case; and turning my looks upon the two women, I said with tears in my eyes, "*You* at all events do not seem to be capable of the grossest wrong towards one who never injured you!" For they were of respectable appearance and there was nothing in their looks to cause alarm or misgiving.

"My dear young lady," said the elder female, "we have but one course to pursue, and that is to obey the instructions which we have received. Will you have the kindness to walk in?"

These last words were uttered not exactly with rudeness or brutality, but in a voice which showed very plainly that the command must be obeyed. I accordingly perceived that further remonstrance was vain, and proceeded up the little gravel-walk leading to the house. The women kept close to me, and Morley followed behind: but the females alone entered the house with me; and merely saying "Good night" to Morley, they closed the

front door. They then conducted me into a neatly furnished parlour, where candles were burning and a table was spread with refreshments; and immediately afterwards I heard the retreating sounds of the post-chaise as it whirled rapidly away.

The younger woman, whom I had already accurately conjectured to be the servant, now proceeded to divest me of my bonnet and cloak, treating me however with as much respect as if I were a lady. She then withdrew; and the elder female, speaking in a kind tone, said, "Now, Miss Price, pray sit down and take some refreshments. Draw near the fire—you look cold: indeed it is a bitter cold night. Will you take a glass of wine pure? or shall I mix you a little negus? See, the kettle is boiling."

I sat down near the fire; for I was indeed trembling all over—not with cold alone, but also with the wretchedness of my own feelings. I made no reply to the words which the woman had addressed to me: I could not do otherwise than regard her as an enemy, and dislike her accordingly. Indeed, I should perhaps have been better pleased had she spoken with less kindness; because I knew very well that this matronly warmth of manner could only be a mask assumed to cover the part of female gaoler which she was in reality acting.

"Why do you not speak to me, Miss Price?" she asked. "You see that I know your name. You can call me Mrs. Ferguson; and the servant's name is Anne. There is nobody else in the house; and so now you are acquainted with all its inmates."

"Ah! there is nobody else in the house?" said I, instantaneously understanding that the remark was made to re-assure and cheer me, though I did not altogether believe the statement to be true. "Then, would you have me suppose that it is you, Mrs. Ferguson, who have had me carried off?"

"You cannot be so childish as to think *that*, my dear," she answered. "But I can give you no explanations; and therefore it will be useless for you to vex yourself by putting questions which cannot be answered. Suffice it for you to know for the present that you are mistress of this house—that I am your housekeeper, and your companion if you choose—and that Anne is your servant."

"Well, then," I exclaimed, rising from my seat, "if I am the mistress, of course I am to be obeyed:"—and I rang the bell violently.

Anne almost immediately made her appearance.

"Fetch me my bonnet and cloak again," said I in a voice of command.

"For what purpose, my dear girl?" asked Mrs. Ferguson, while Anne stood near the door, showing no intention to obey my orders.

"What for?" I exclaimed: "to leave this house, to be sure!"

"That cannot be," rejoined Mrs. Ferguson, "You must understand to what extent you are mistress here——"

"Yes—a prisoner—a captive!" I cried bitterly. "Let me be conducted to a bed-chamber."

"But will you not take some refreshment?" asked Mrs. Ferguson entreatingly.

"No—nothing," was my abrupt response; and as Anne had just lighted a chamber-candle, I followed her from the room without taking any farther notice of Mrs. Ferguson.

The young woman conducted me up a narrow but neatly-carpetted staircase, to a bed-chamber on the first floor. The room was nicely furnished in the cottage style; the hangings of the window and the bed curtains being of snow-white dimity. A fire burnt in the grate; and thus there was nothing cold in the aspect of the chamber. I observed that there was a second bed, placed at the foot of the one with the white curtains; and as my eyes rested upon it, Anne said, "I am to sleep here with you, Miss."

This announcement suddenly cheered and gratified me, although I at once comprehended that the presence of the young woman was to prevent my escape from the house: but on the other hand it convinced me that no foul treachery was meditated, at least for the present, by the real author of this outrage, whoever he might be.

I noticed that Anne locked the door and took out the key; though where she deposited it I was not able to discover, as she bustled about the room for a minute or two afterwards—no doubt to prevent me from observing where she did secrete it. She then offered to assist me in undressing; but I had not become a fine lady all in a moment, and therefore dispensed with her services. She made no endeavour to draw me into discourse; and I had no inclination to encourage it. Indeed, I was exhausted and worn out alike in mind and body; though when I lay down I was very far from fancying that sleep would soon visit my eyelids. It was however otherwise: for scarcely had my head touched the pillow, when, no doubt through great weariness, I fell into a deep slumber.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MY CAPTIVITY.

I DID not awake till a late hour in the day; and when I opened my eyes I fancied for an instant that I had been whirled through the mysterious mazes of a troubled dream. But on beholding the white dimity curtains, and embracing at a glance all the features of the chamber, I saw full well that I was not in my own room at Harlesdon Park. A prolonged sigh escaped me: but I felt so much refreshed with the deep slumber I had enjoyed, that I was not altogether cast down nor devoid of hope. There were no bars to the windows; and I thought to myself that it would be indeed a very strange thing if I could not manage to elude the vigilance and escape from the power of the two women, supposing that they indeed were the only inmates of the house besides myself.

When I thus awoke, I was alone in the bed-chamber. Anne had risen, and had left me to slumber on. I rose, and drawing aside the blind, looked out of the window. There had been a fall of snow within the last few hours: indeed, the fleecy flakes were still descending thickly; and the face of nature, as far as the eye could reach, was of dazzling whiteness. There was not another house to be seen; and yet my eyes could embrace a sweep of some miles of wintry landscape. In what secluded place was I imprisoned? to what lonely spot had I thus been borne a captive? Vainly did I ask myself these questions. Nor indeed, could I conjecture whether I was twelve, fifteen, or twenty miles from Harlesdon Park; be-

cause I knew not how long the chaise had been rolling onward while I was still in a swoon, or what distance it might have accomplished ere I regained my senses.

There was something indescribably cheerless and dispiriting in the prospect which met my view from the chamber-window; and closing the curtain again, I rang the bell. Anne almost immediately made her appearance, unlocking the door: for be it understood that it was securely fastened. She came with hot water and fuel to light the fire; and this I suffered her to do, for I felt really cold and wretched to a degree. I missed the prattle of the children, Jemima's cheerful voice, and the gay aspect of the nursery-chambers at Harlesdon Park: I likewise felt as if in being separated from my mistress, I had been torn from the protection of a sincere friend. My heart swelled almost to bursting; and sitting down near the fire which Anne had just lighted, I gave vent to my grief in a copious flood of tears.

"Don't take on so, Miss," said the servant-woman in a kinder tone than I thought she was capable of using. "Everything will be done to make you comfortable."

"How long am I to remain here?" I asked, in the sudden hope of drawing her into a conversation that would throw some light upon the destiny reserved for me.

She shook her head, and then observed in a slow voice, "I do hope that you will not put any leading questions to me; for if you do, it will only make me dread to come into your presence."

"And yet, if you could only place yourself for a moment in my position," said I, entreatingly, "do you not think that you would be devoured by the same uncertainty, experience the tortures of the same suspense, and be goaded as it were, to put

the same questions? Ah! and if I were in your position, at any risk and at all peril would I appease the sufferings of a fellow-creature!"

"All this is very fine, Miss," returned Anne, her look becoming vulgarly contemptuous and her voice coarsely rude: "but it is a dodge that doesn't do with me. If you can pay me better for revealing secrets than somebody else does for keeping them, I might perhaps think over the matter. When you have done dressing, please to ring the bell."

Having thus spoken, she quitted the room, fastening the door behind her; and I sat for a few minutes in a sort of stupor of amazement at this sudden throwing off of the mask on the part of that woman. What! the kindness of tone which she had first assumed, and the calm respectability of her manner, were all a delusion and an hypocrisy? She was an abject, selfish wretch, who would sell her soul to the highest bidder, or even betray the interests of one paymaster if another offered a larger fee. Perhaps, then, Mrs. Ferguson was the same? No doubt of it. Into what society had I then fallen? To what detestable company had I been consigned? Alas! I dared not yield any farther to the anguish of my thoughts: they were maddening me.

In a strange state of feverishness did I dress myself. All the requisites for the toilet were there—new brushes for the hair, teeth, and hands—scented soaps—oils, pomatums, dentrifices, and fragrant waters sufficient for the dressing-room of a duchess. When my toilet was accomplished, I sat down to compose my feelings ere I descended the stairs. As a matter of course the idea of escape was uppermost in my mind: but I made no doubt that just in proportion as my design should be suspected, would the vigilance of the two women be. To throw them off their guard, or to lull their suspicions asleep, I must appear to become reconciled to my fate, whatever it might be; and by this little piece of duplicity did it strike me that I could alone hope to accomplish my flight from this lonely prison-house.

I accordingly resolved to assume as tranquil an aspect as possible; and having composed my feelings to the utmost of my power, I rang the bell. Anne re-appeared, her countenance—which, by the by, was somewhat good-looking—having settled down again into an expression too well calculated to veil the hardness and blackness of her heart. In short, she had the air of a quiet, respectable, civil, and good-tempered woman.

I descended to the same parlour where I had been escorted on my arrival; and there I found Mrs. Ferguson seated near the fire, occupied with her knitting. The breakfast things were spread upon the table: there were cold ham, fowl, and tongue; and the servant speedily brought up tea, coffee, eggs, and toast.

"Good morning, my dear Miss Price," said Mrs. Ferguson, half rising from her seat in a respectful manner, but with matronly kindness of tone and look. "I am glad to find that you slept so well. You are rather pale this morning, but not looking much the worse for the little excitement you passed through. Sit down and get your breakfast: I am sure you must want it. It quite pained me to think that you went to bed without taking a morsel of food or a drop of wine. Now, my dear girl, will you permit me to help you? or will you help yourself?"

"Thank you," said I, speaking civilly, in accordance with the resolve I had just formed as to my future demeanour in the presence of my female gaolers: "I will help myself. What o'clock is it?"

"Close upon mid-day," answered Mrs. Ferguson. "Usually, I have no doubt, you will breakfast at eight or nine, and perhaps take your dinner at three—have tea at seven—and to bed soon after ten? Such is the routine I have chalked out for you, provided you are agreeable: but as I told you on your arrival, you are the mistress here, with but a single restriction."

"And that restriction," said I, as I poured out my tea, "is in respect to my liberty?"

"Exactly so. Of course you can go out for a walk at reasonable hours, and when the weather permits."

"That will at all events be an alleviation of my captivity," said I; and hope grew stronger within me: for it struck me that when walking out, even if both the women were to accompany me, it would be strange indeed if I did not manage to escape. "But are there nice walks about here?"

"This is winter-time, and no walks can be termed agreeable now," answered the woman.

"Yes—it does indeed seem a lonely part of the country," I observed. "But there are plenty of trees through whose skeleton branches the December wind may moan, or whistle, or rave."

"Yes—it is gloomy now; but in the summer it is very beautiful—all one mass of green; because, as you hinted just now, it is a lonely spot and there are no houses very near. Indeed the nearest village——"

But Mrs. Ferguson suddenly stopped short, as if about to tread on forbidden ground and afford me some slight clue to my whereabouts.

"Have you lived here long?" I asked: and as I spoke I could not help looking round the room, which, as well as all the other parts of the house I had seen, wore the appearance of having only recently been done up.

"No—I only came hither a few days ago," answered Mrs. Ferguson: "but all this part of the country is familiar to me. The house, in plain terms—for on this point I need use no disguise—was taken and fitted up on purpose for you."

"On purpose for me!" I echoed with unfeigned surprise: for this revelation had suddenly made me aware that the conspiracy of which I was a victim had been in preparation for some time past.

"Yes—and it may become your own property, too, I have no doubt, if you like. But that depends entirely upon yourself. Of course, if you are wise and prudent——But however," said Mrs. Ferguson, again interrupting herself, "there's plenty of time to talk upon that. Why, you are eating nothing but bread-and-butter, I declare. No ham—not even so much as an egg——"

"Thank you: I never eat anything but plain bread-and-butter for breakfast. You were however observing something about my own prudence and wisdom?"

"Yes—but I meant in a worldly point of view, you know," answered Mrs. Ferguson. "Another time I will explain myself more fully. As yet I am

a perfect stranger to you; and perhaps the impression you have formed of me is not very favourable. Indeed, this is but natural, considering the circumstances under which we have met."

"If you will really be kind and good to me, and give me proper advice," I began: but I stopped short—the words stuck in my throat—I felt ashamed of myself for carrying hypocrisy to such an extent as even to pretend to believe that any thing good could possibly come from a woman who had accepted such an office as her's.

"Well, my dear, we shall see, we shall see," she said. "And now what will you do to amuse yourself? It will be impossible to go out to-day. Did you look in the cupboard in your room? or did Anne forget to direct your attention thereto?"

"I did not look in the cupboard at all," was my answer.

"Then pray do—you will find several kinds of stuffs, as well as some beautiful silks, to make up into winter-dresses; and as I am somewhat proficient in the dressmaker's art, if you will give me leave I will set to work along with you in making you up a suitable wardrobe."

I was about to give an indignant refusal to the proposition and scorn the bare idea of accepting anything more than the mere necessaries of life at the hands of any one who had been instrumental in my captivity: but I suddenly remembered that such a course would be at variance with the determination I had formed to assume as contented a demeanour as possible.

"Well," said I, "let us go and inspect the cupboard."

I could see that Mrs. Ferguson looked hard at me from under her brows for a moment, as if to ascertain whether I was sincere or playing a part; and I felt a sudden blush mantle upon my cheeks as I averted my head.

"Come then, Miss Price," she said, and methought in a slightly altered tone; "let us go and look at the cupboard."

Up-stairs we accordingly went, to the room where I had slept; and the moment the woman opened the cupboard-door, I observed that the shelves were laden with the costliest articles that could possibly gratify a woman's vanity. There were stuffs for morning and walking dresses—the finest cloth for a winter pelisse—silks and satins—two complete sets of furs, one for common wear and the other for full dress—shawls of five or six descriptions—several handsome bonnets, as well as neat straw ones—veils, shoes and boots, and all kinds of articles necessary for the wardrobe of a lady of the highest fashion.

"But let us see what we have here," said Mrs. Ferguson, opening a large morocco-cover box. "There! these are yours also," she exclaimed:—and then I *felt* that her keen eyes were fixed upon me to read my innermost thoughts.

"Very beautiful indeed," said I, contemplating the truly dazzling and brilliant contents of that box: for there were pearls and diamonds, two elegant watches, three or four splendid gold chains, rings, and jewels of every description for the feminine toilet.

"All these are yours—everything that is here," repeated the woman, still watching my countenance to mark the effect of her words.

"They are very handsome," I said: but in reality, so far from being dazzled or flattered by the costly gifts, I inwardly loathed them, and felt a bitter shame and a burning indignation that any one should have so misjudged my character as to believe that I was to be conciliated or lured into wickedness by such temptations.

"Shall we begin to make up these dresses?" asked Mrs. Ferguson: "for remember, you have got nothing to put on but what you stand upright in."

"Yes—we will try our joint ingenuity upon this," said I, taking forth one of the stuff dresses.

"The very plainest and commonest of the whole lot!" exclaimed Mrs. Ferguson.

"Yes—but it is for ordinary wear," said I; "and besides, I have taken a fancy to it:"—but in my own heart I was resolutely determined that not another one of the dresses upon that shelf should ever be touched by scissors or needle on my account.

Mrs. Ferguson locked the cupboard, and gave me the key, saying, "There—keep it: it is all your property."

"But," said I, "do you not think it dangerous to keep such quantities of valuables in so lonely a house tenanted only by three females?"

"Who would suspect that there were such things within these walls?" asked Mrs. Ferguson. "Besides, my dear girl," she added with a significant look, "it will much depend upon yourself how long you remain *here*."

"It is apparent enough," said I, "that these gifts could not have been intended to wear in such a lonely place. I could not walk out in silks and satins over these fields, nor put on all that fine jewellery to be stared at by the rustics whom I might meet in my walks."

"True," observed Mrs. Ferguson: "and therefore you must look forward to the day when you can be transferred from this lonely house in a neighbourhood almost uninhabited, to some splendid mansion——"

But here the woman stopped short: for a blush once more rose to my cheeks, and she no doubt fancied she was going a little too fast and a little too far. And I can assure you, reader, that the blush which her words had suddenly conjured up, did but feebly express the indignation that had again boiled up within me; and it was only with a strong and almost preterhuman effort that I kept down a full ebullition of my goaded feelings. For could there now be any mistake as to the motive of my captivity and the object with which all that wealth of rich dresses and glittering gems had been placed in my way? or was it possible to doubt the true meaning of the additional lure thrown out in the woman's hint that I should sooner or later remove from this lonely cottage to a splendid mansion?

Turning hastily away from her searching glance, I said, "Let us go down and begin the dress."

We accordingly descended once more to the parlour; and Mrs. Ferguson began to cut out the dress. She went to work in so artistic a manner that I was soon convinced she must have had more acquaintance with the dress-making business than she had chosen to admit. I assisted her in the sewing; and in this manner several hours passed away. As I had

breakfasted so late, dinner was not served till near five o'clock. A handsome repast was then placed upon the table: wine and dessert followed. Mrs. Ferguson paid her respects to all these good things in a manner which would have fitted her for the wife of an alderman; and she was much astonished as well as amazed, to find that I selected the plainest food and could be persuaded to drink nothing but water. After dinner we worked again till tea-time; and as this latter repast was served up very late, we retired to our chambers soon afterwards.

Anne was in attendance upon me. Again did she lock the chamber door, and then bustle about under pretence of arranging different things in the room—but no doubt to hide the key somewhere. Few were the words that passed between us: she was evidently inclined to be taciturn—and I, from her manner in the morning, had conceived too strong an aversion for her to be able to force myself into familiarity. Indeed I disliked her much more than Mrs. Ferguson, although I had no doubt in my own mind that they were equally mercenary, cruel, and unprincipled.

"You seem to be getting reconciled to your new home, Miss," said Anne, when we were each in our bed and the light was put out.

"Yes—a little," I answered. "It is no use breaking one's heart."

"Not a bit," she exclaimed. "There you are right enough: and I am sure if I was you, what with a nice house like this for the present, and a fine mansion somewhere else at a future time—with all those jewels and elegant dresses too in the cupboard—I should be as happy as the day was long."

"Then you are fond of jewels and fine dresses, Anne?" said I.

"Yes, Miss," she answered.

"Why do you call me *Miss?*" I inquired. "Surely you must know that I am but a servant-maid like yourself?"

"Ah! but you are not a servant-maid any longer," responded Anne. "Besides, here you are a young lady at all events; and I am bound to treat you so. Good night, Miss."

"Good night, Anne."

But I could not go to sleep so easily as when I before lay down in this self-same couch. I was not overcome with the same weariness, nor prostrated with the same exhaustion. It was therefore natural that my brain should be more busy: and it was so. That I was the object of dishonourable intentions on the part of some individual, was but too evident. But who could he be? or rather who else could it be save Clavering? Had he not vowed the most implacable vengeance against me? and would it not be wreaked by the accomplishment of my ruin? Ah! if it were indeed Clavering, I thought, who was thus surrounding me with temptations, how little did he know of my heart! Then, as the contents of the cupboard were forcibly brought back to my memory, I again reflected upon the danger of having so much wealth in such a lonely place. This strain of meditation led me on to ponder upon the brief dialogue which had ere now taken place between Anne and myself. She was evidently selfish and mercenary to a degree: she had admitted her fondness for rich dresses and jewellery. What if I were to offer her the entire contents of that cupboard to suffer me to escape? The things were all my own—Mrs. Ferguson had said so: I could therefore do with them as I liked. And then I remembered how Anne had declared her readiness to betray one paymaster if she could find another who could pay her better.

"Yes," thought I to myself, "I will endeavour to bribe her to my interest:" and I was almost inclined to renew the conversation at the moment. But prudence whispered a caution to reflect well upon the course which I might pursue; and the question, "Why could not Anne have stolen the jewels and dresses if she had chosen, before I came?" started up in my mind. The bare idea made me shudder at first: for I thought how easily she could murder me in my sleep in order to possess herself of the property. But the next instant I felt ashamed of my fears, because it was evidently not necessary to kill me in order to appropriate the dresses and jewellery unto herself. She had only to propose my escape in order to leave herself mistress of the field and decamp while Mrs. Ferguson slept.

This train of reflection naturally led me to the conclusion that the reward which Anne was to have for serving as custodian over me, must be even greater than the value of the jewels and the dresses; and therefore I was well pleased on mature consideration at not having proposed to her a bribe which, according to this surmise of mine, she was not likely to accept. Finally I fell asleep, while pondering upon these and other matters deeply interesting to myself; and when I awoke in the morning the grey light of the wintry day was just glimmering in through the opening in the curtains. Anne was already up and had gone down stairs: I therefore rose at once, dressed myself, and descended to the parlour.

This day and the next passed without any incident worthy of mention: the one following was Christmas Day. More forcibly than ever was now brought back to my mind the recollection of many things too well calculated to arouse the deepest feelings of my soul. Not merely did I regret the loss of the friendly companionship of my dear mistress, Lady Harlesdon—the good-tempered Jemima—and the little prattling children: but I also thought of my brothers and sisters—especially too of the unhappy Robert! I wondered what he was doing—whether still following a career of vice, or whether by some providential interference rescued from those evil ways. Alas! I dared not hope that such was the case; and I wept—oh, how bitterly, bitterly I wept—in the solitude of my own chamber that day, as I thought of Robert!

Nor less did I wonder how it had fared with Leonard Percival and Ellen Kirkland—whether they had succeeded in accomplishing their escape from the vicinage of Harlesdon Park? That they had done so, I felt pretty well assured; inasmuch as it was evident, after all, that there had really been no intention on the part of their enemies to carry off Ellen:—and moreover, had I not seen Leonard in safety and security a few minutes before I myself was so cruelly ensnared?

But I will not pause to weary the reader with the reflections that occupied me or the painful thoughts I experienced on that Christmas Day which I passed at the White Cottage—for such appeared to be the name of the habitation. Suffice it to say that it was indeed a wretched,

wretched Christmas day, forming one of the darkest dates in the history of my eventful life.

Ten days passed, during which the weather continued most inclement; and thus for a whole fortnight I was unable to stir out of the cottage. My mind was frequently too unsettled to allow me to adhere very closely to the occupation of needlework; and during those intervals of restlessness, I would wander from room to room to seek relief in even such little change of scene as this. I have before stated that the house stood a little way back from the lane, having a small garden in front: behind the habitation there was a much larger garden, but in a very neglected condition, there being no one to take care of it. A large outhouse, with two windows and a chimney, seemed however evidently intended for the dwelling of a gardener: but the shutters were always up at those windows, and no smoke ever came out of the chimney. To all appearances, therefore, that outhouse was untenanted; and yet I know not how it was, but sometimes as I stood at the landing window, which looked on the back part of the premises, I would keep my eyes fixed upon the outhouse with a sort of instinctive feeling that there was really some one there. This idea, although at first without the slightest ground for it beyond my own fancy, was strengthened in my mind by a little circumstance which occurred on the sixth or seventh day of my captivity. It was this:—I was standing at the landing window, when I observed Anne hurrying forth from the back door with something in her hands, but which was covered up with her apron. She was evidently bending her steps towards the outhouse; and I stood aside in such a way that if she were to look up she could not observe my countenance at the window, though I could still continue to watch her motions. And she did look up at the back windows,—sweeping her glance over them, as it were, in a rapid but scrutinizing manner:—then evidently satisfied that she was unobserved by me (for it could only be *my* notice that she was thus fearful of attracting), she hurried on to the outhouse. The door thereof was not locked; for she at once entered it; and after remaining there for about two minutes, issued forth again—but without the object, whatever it were, that she had carried in under her apron.

At this moment Mrs. Ferguson, who never let me be absent from the parlour many minutes, unless watched by herself or Anne, called out, "Miss Price, where are you?"—and I accordingly hurried down stairs.

The little incident which I have just related, served to strengthen, though not absolutely confirm, the suspicion that the outhouse had an inmate: for it naturally struck me that Anne's visit thither had been to convey some food. The circumstance troubled me considerably, although I concealed this fresh source of annoyance as well as I was able. But it troubled me, because, if my suspicion were correct, it was evident that the individual, whoever he were, must be concealed there for some purpose; and for what purpose could this be, unless to keep watch upon the house and prevent any attempt at escape on my part? I therefore began to fear that all the little dissimulation I practised to put the two women off their guard and make them fancy that I was becoming reconciled to my position, would be thrown away and avail me not in my hope of escape from the White Cottage.

I have already said that a fortnight had passed without my being enabled to stir out of the house. At length a bright frosty day, with the sky all azure purity above, and the ground hard as marble below, afforded me an opportunity of testing the sincerity of Mrs. Ferguson's words when she announced to me on my arrival that I should be allowed to walk forth in favourable weather. Accordingly, so soon as breakfast was over, I said to Mrs. Ferguson, "You will permit me to take a walk? for I am literally pining for fresh air."

"Certainly, my dear," she answered, assuming her blandest and most cheerful demeanour. "Put on your things, and we will sally forth at once."

With a certain lightness of the heart such as I had not experienced since the first moment of my captivity, I ascended to my chamber, Anne officiously following to help me with my toilet, but in reality, as a matter of course, to watch my movements: for as I have before observed, I was scarcely permitted to go even from one room to another without having either Mrs. Ferguson or the servant at my heels.

To be brief, having put on my bonnet and cloak, I descended the stairs again, and found Mrs. Ferguson ready equipped for the walk. At first I imagined that Anne would likewise accompany us, so as to be an additional guard upon my movements. But this was not the case. Mrs. Ferguson and I went forth alone. She however took my arm—not allowing me to take hers, nor yet to walk singly; and she kept a sort of hold upon me which plainly enough evinced her readiness as well as her determination to anticipate any attempt at flight on my part.

We did not proceed many paces down the lane in which the cottage was situated, ere we entered the fields by means of a gate, Mrs. Ferguson acting as the guide, and still keeping tight hold of me even as we passed through that gate. I began to reflect within myself whether I should make a desperate effort to escape, or trust to a future occasion and to the chapter of accidents. Mrs. Ferguson was a powerful woman, and could coerce me so long as she held me in her grasp: but on the other hand, I knew very well that if I could only manage to break away from her, I could not possibly fail to outstrip her in speed. I had almost resolved to make the attempt, when it suddenly struck me that there might be somebody else following: for I could scarcely conceive it possible that Mrs. Ferguson would thus trust herself out with me alone. I was about to look round; but the idea likewise flashed to my mind that such a movement on my part would at once excite her suspicion of my object. I accordingly dropped my handkerchief as a pretext; and while I stooped to pick it up, I was enabled to glance back. There, sure enough, was a man following at a distance of about fifty yards. He seemed to be dressed in the attire of a labourer; but the hurried view which I had of him, totally prevented me from taking any further note of his appearance.

Mrs. Ferguson did not appear to fancy that the dropping of the handkerchief was a mere pretext on my part: or if she did, she neither mentioned her suspicion in words, nor betrayed it in her looks.

"Well, my dear child," she said, as we walked on together, "it seems to me that you have ceased to fret on account of your captivity. If this is really the case, you are acting a wise part. What is the use of making yourself miserable? A pretty creature like you should abandon such low ideas as to think of remaining a servant-maid all your life. You are as good as a lady now, and may become one altogether if you choose."

I was about to give a very indignant reply, when recollecting the cautious part which I had been playing from the commencement of my captivity, and which, from the observations the woman had just made, seemed to have produced the desired effect, I controlled my anger—but kept silent: for I could not possibly play the hypocrite so far as even to appear to enter into the spirit of her remarks.

"Ah! no doubt," she continued, "you will grow wiser the more you reflect upon what is your real interest. We must all push our way in the world. Some persons are born with fortunes ready made, and they have generally ugly faces: others are born without any fortunes at all; but they very often have pretty faces—and a pretty face is as good as a fortune."

Here Mrs. Ferguson paused, and looked at me very hard—doubtless to see the effect which her words produced. But I bent my eyes down, and still remained silent.

"As a matter of course," she continued, "you must understand that you are the object of tender regard with a certain personage who has conceived a violent attachment for you. Look at all the handsome things he has bought for your use: and I am empowered to promise a great deal more, if——"

"Do not talk to me any farther on this subject," I exclaimed, my indignation now suddenly mastering all ideas of precaution and all power of dissimulation. At the same time, by a sudden and desperate exertion, I tore away from Mrs. Ferguson, and with a speed which even astonished myself, bounded across the field, hope and terror alike giving wings to my feet.

"Ah! vile treacherous girl!" screamed forth the woman: but she did not attempt to run after me—for the labourer, who had been following at a distance, was very soon at my heels.

I ran—I ran, as if life or death were alternating in the scales: and thus for about five minutes did the chase continue. But at the end of the long field over which I was thus speeding, a gate barred my way; and while I was compelled to stop to open it, I was overtaken by the individual in the garb of a labourer. But what words can depict my mingled amazement and terror, when a glance at this individual's countenance showed me the well-known features of Nick Sawbridge?

"Ah! I have got you, have I?" he exclaimed, as he caught me by the waist.

I was sinking down at the moment, in mingled exhaustion and anguish, against the gate, when the mere touch of the man made me spring up as if from the contact of a venomous reptile; and disengaging myself from his grasp, I shrieked forth, "Unhand me, and I will go quietly back with you!"

"Well, I don't want to use no violence, or yet vex you in any way," observed Sawbridge, now assuming a somewhat more respectful demeanour. "My orders is to watch you narrowly, but to treat you as gentle as a lamb. Come now, Miss Price, you was wrong to bolt away like that—cause why you must know that it wouldn't do."

While he was thus speaking, I glanced across the field, and observed that Mrs. Ferguson, though advancing somewhat rapidly towards us, was still at a distance and far beyond ear-shot. An idea had entered my head. I knew the unprincipled character of the villain Sawbridge too well not to be aware that it must be very indifferent to him whom he served so long as he was liberally paid, and that the only question with him would be who was the best paymaster.

"One word!" I said in an hurried tone. "What if I were to remunerate you very handsomely?—would you connive at my escape?"

"It all depends upon the reward," he at once answered. "Show me that you can make it better worth my while to serve you than my present employer, and I shan't hesitate long."

"I have, in my room at the cottage," was my hurried rejoinder, "property to an immense value—jewels of every description, silks and satins, and splendid shawls, all worth I cannot say how much, but certainly many hundred pounds. It is all mine—and it shall be all your's if you will help me to escape."

"Ah! but is this really true?" asked Sawbridge, his eyes glistening with delight; and yet there was a certain incredulity in his looks.

"I never tell a falsehood," was my answer. "But haste—speak—tell me your decision! Mrs. Ferguson is approaching——"

"Yes," he at once replied. "But not another word now! Don't let it appear we have been talking together. I'll find an opportunity of speaking to you again. I live on the premises yonder——"

"Ah!" I ejaculated, all my suspicions relative to the outhouse confirmed in a moment.

"Hush! she will see that there is something between us," interjected Sawbridge impatiently; "and that will spoil all—for she is as sharp as a knife, mind that! Now don't appear to be listening. The fact is, I live in the outhouse where I have been concealed all the time since you have been at the cottage; and I am there on purpose to watch you."

"One word more!" I said in a hurried voice. "Tell me—do you know what has become of my brother Robert?"

"I hav'n't seen him for a long time," answered Sawbridge. "And now, not another word. But come back with me and meet the old woman."

Inwardly cheered by the hope of escape through this man's intervention, I at once began to retrace my way towards Mrs. Ferguson, who was now scarcely fifty yards distant. Sawbridge walked close behind me; and of course we spoke not another word to each other.

"A pretty trick you tried to play me, Miss Price!" exclaimed Mrs. Ferguson, raising her voice as we approached each other. "But you see you gained nothing by the movement. I could scarcely believe that you was such a deceitful girl—although I have more than once suspected that when you pretended to be cheerful you were only playing a part. Now I know you thoroughly——"

"Mrs. Ferguson," I interrupted, feeling that my countenance was becoming crimson with indignation, "I desire that you will not address me in

this manner. That I should have attempted to make my escape was natural enough——"

But here a sudden revulsion of feeling took place within me; and I burst into tears.

"Come, come, don't make yourself unhappy," said the woman, now adopting a soothing tone. "I must not have you pine or whine, and so make yourself look thin and pale:"—and as she thus spoke she took my arm once more, at the same time beckoning to Sawbridge to fall back to a distance.

While we retraced our way to the White Cottage, little more was said. Mrs. Ferguson endeavoured to cheer my spirits: but I paid no attention to her remarks; and on reaching the house, I hastened upstairs to my chamber, where I again gave vent to my tears. But as the hurried colloquy which had taken place with Sawbridge came back to my mind, I felt that hope was once more awakening within me; and drying my tears, I began to reflect how it was likely he would further my views, and when he would put into execution any plan which he might conceive to fulfil his promise and accomplish my escape? When I descended to the parlour again, I found Mrs. Ferguson very busy in writing a letter, over which she threw the blotting-paper the moment I made my appearance. But at once to assure her that I scorned the idea of using my good eye-sight in the attempt to read her letter from the place which I usually occupied on the opposite side of the table, I advanced to the window and looked out.

I had not been many minutes at the casement, when I observed a tall female form, enveloped from head to foot in a dark cloak, the hood of which was drawn far over her head, come down the lane—pause at a little distance from the cottage—and survey it with the air of one who had some motive for the scrutiny. While she was thus stopping short, a sudden gust of wind, sweeping up the lane, blew back her hood, and revealed to me a countenance which was too remarkable, when once seen, to be easily forgotten. Indeed, I immediately recognised the handsome features of the Gipsy Queen, from whose arms I had received little Isabella Clementina at the low public-house in St. Giles's.

It was only by a sudden exercise of my presence of mind that I avoided giving vent to an ejaculation of astonishment on thus beholding the gipsy; for it at once flashed to my brain that her presence in this vicinage was somehow or another connected with myself. The woman not only caught sight of me at the window, but also perceived that I had recognised her; and she instantaneously made a sign of intelligence and placed her finger upon her lip. She then drew her hood over her countenance once more, turned abruptly round, and retracing her way up the lane, disappeared from my view.

What could this mean? Was she in the neighbourhood as an enemy or as a friend to me? Scarcely an hour had elapsed since the occurrence in the field; and if Sawbridge were leagued with the woman, and meant to avail himself of her assistance to further my views of escape, had there been time for him during that brief interval to communicate with her on that point? It certainly struck me that she had come to *reconnoitre* the premises. But might it not be with some hostile intent as regarded myself? Yet if so, why that sign of intelligence, as much as to enjoin secrecy in respect to the circumstance of my perceiving her? I knew not what to think: and Oh! how fervently I prayed in the depths of my soul that all these mysterious proceedings and bewildering circumstances, all these commingling hopes and fears, anticipations and misgivings, would speedily come to a conclusion!

As I turned away from the window, I observed that Mrs. Ferguson had just finished the letter which she had been writing. She now folded it up, and was addressing it; having done which, she immediately placed the blotting-paper upon it so as to dry the ink; and rising from her seat, quitted the room with the letter—no doubt to despatch it to its place of destination. Without any ulterior intention I approached the table—took my usual seat—and was about to resume my needlework, when my eye happened to catch the blotting-paper which Mrs. Ferguson had hurriedly thrown aside after last using it. There I beheld a perfect impression of the address, but of course reading backwards, as it would do in such a case. I could not help reading the lines that had thus been transferred to the blotting-paper; and to my surprise I found that the letter had been addressed to "*Lord Harlesdon, Harlesdon Park*," and had "*Strictly Private*" in the corner. I say that I was surprised, because I wondered for what reason Mrs. Ferguson could be in correspondence with the nobleman. That he had been privy to the entire stratagem for forcibly carrying me off through the agency of John Morley, was already clear enough: but was I now to think that his lordship was the individual who had purchased all those rich dresses and fine jewels wherewith it was hoped to dazzle me? was it he to whom Mrs. Ferguson had alluded in a way that had provoked my indignation? Was it Lord Harlesdon, in short, who entertained the most dishonourable views with regard to me? I began to think that such indeed must be the case, and that after all, Sir Aubrey Clavering had really nothing to do with the matter.

Such were the hurried thoughts that swept through my brain during the couple of minutes of Mrs. Ferguson's absence from the room. When she returned, she hastily put her writing-materials together—it being now dinner-time—and did not therefore notice the circumstance of the visible impression upon the blotting-paper. Anne came in to lay the cloth—dinner was served up—and the remainder of the day passed without any other incident worthy of mention. When I lay down to rest that night, it was a long while before I could get to sleep: for the day had been fraught with occurrences full well calculated to engross my thoughts and inspire them with activity. The promise of succour received from Sawbridge—the presence of the Gipsy Queen in that neighbourhood, so many miles from her usual haunts in the suburbs of London—and the discovery that Mrs. Ferguson was in correspondence with Lord Harlesdon, all combined to fill me with mingled hopes and fears. At length however I fell asleep; and when I awoke in the morning, I found that the weather was still as frosty, clear, and beautiful as on the preceding day.

On descending to the parlour, I found Mrs. Ferguson occupied in reading a letter, which she however immediately consigned to her pocket as I approached the table. I sat down, thinking to myself that this letter was very probably an answer to the one she had despatched on the previous day; and it struck me that Sawbridge had most probably served

as the means of communication between the White Cottage and Harlesdon Park: for I had never once seen a postman come near the secluded spot in which I was held captive. When breakfast was over, I was about to propose another walk: but Mrs. Ferguson herself said, with a smile which she endeavoured to render as remonstratingly good-humoured as possible, "Come, Miss Price—if you will promise me not to renew your attempt of yesterday, we will take a little stroll: for the weather is really charming."

I made no reply; because I was determined not to give any pledge against future attempts at escape—my resolve being to lose no opportunity, with or without Sawbridge's connivance, of flying from a detested captivity. Hastening up-stairs—followed as usual by Anne—I put on my walking apparel; and as I descended from my chamber again, I mechanically looked forth from the back window. To my surprise I perceived Sawbridge at the extremity of the garden, talking to a gentleman on horseback, who was on the other side of the hedge; and although he was too far off for me to obtain an accurate view of him, yet by the tall slender figure and the moustache, as well as by the semi-military apparel of closely-buttoned frock-coat and a gold lace stripe down the trousers, I felt convinced he was none other than Sir Aubrey Clavering.

An exclamation fell from my lips; and I stood nailed as it were at the window. But in a few moments the horseman galloped away across the fields; and Nick Sawbridge hurried back towards the outhouse. Anne, who was close behind me on the landing, uttered some expression of vexation and annoyance, about "loitering on the stairs and gaping out of windows." I turned round and looked fixedly at the servant, saying in an indignant tone, "What do you mean? am I not even to look out of a window? Ah! I recognised that individual: but I will sooner perish——"

And then I suddenly stopped short: for I saw that a kind of contemptuous, if not ironical, sneer was gathering on the woman's countenance; and I was angry with myself for having even taken notice of the expressions to which she had given utterance. Descending to the parlour, I found Mrs. Ferguson ready dressed in her walking attire, and waiting for me: but I hesitated whether to accompany her forth, as I felt convinced that Sir Aubrey Clavering was in the neighbourhood. A second thought however told me that if he meditated any treachery, he could as easily come to the house and renew his persecutions towards me there, as waylay me in the open country for that purpose; and moreover, as he had galloped so abruptly away, it struck me that he was gone for good—at least for the present. I accordingly sallied forth with Mrs. Ferguson. Again did she take my arm—again did we turn into the fields—and again, in a few minutes, did I catch a glimpse of Sawbridge following in the rear.

"As I descended the stairs just now," I observed, looking very hard in Mrs. Ferguson's face, "I saw a gentleman on horseback talking at the bottom of the garden to that man who is now following us."

"Ah! you saw a gentleman, did you, my dear?" exclaimed Mrs. Ferguson, and, as I thought, with a very peculiar look which I could not at all understand: and now she in her turn stared hard at me.

"Yes—I saw him," was my response; "and if I mistake not, he was Sir Aubrey Clavering."

"Indeed you *are* very much mistaken—for I am certain it was not him," she immediately answered, with the most unblushing effrontery.

"Then I never was more in error in my life!" I exclaimed. "But I think you will permit me to believe my own eyes in preference to your bare denial."

She made no answer; and we walked on in silence. I really knew not what to think. Mrs. Ferguson's word, on ordinary occasions, I should not have valued in the least—because a woman who could have undertaken such an office as her's, was not to be supposed to hesitate at a falsehood: but her denial had been given with such an apparent air of triumphant certainty, that it almost seemed as much as to say, "If it were Sir Aubrey, I should not mind telling you so at once: but it was not."

She was the first presently to break the silence which had lasted about five minutes: but she began to talk upon a variety of indifferent and trivial things, to which I merely answered "Yes" or "No," without much noticing whether I even gave the affirmatives or negatives in their right place: for I was engrossed with bewildering thoughts,—every fresh incident which occurred appearing to be marked with so much mystery that I felt as if the meshes of some deeply devised and extensively ramified conspiracy were one after the other gradually displaying themselves as they closed in around me.

We had been walking half-an-hour, and had advanced much farther than the gate where Sawbridge overtook me on the preceding day, when on reaching a stile I looked back as I crossed it, and observed that the individual whom I have just named was making rapid signs to me. He had approached within a distance of about thirty yards; and I could therefore plainly note his gestures, which Mrs. Ferguson herself did not perceive, her back being turned towards him. He was evidently signalling me to escape and fly. This meaning he conveyed with unmistakable signs: then pointing to himself, he shook his head, as much as to infer that he would not pursue me. My heart bounded with hope: but the next instant I felt an evil presentiment stealing in unto my soul. The man had not as yet received anything in the shape of reward from me; and how was he to obtain the promised recompense of the treasures in the cupboard at the cottage, unless from my hand? By urging me to escape, would he not be actually cutting himself out of this recompense? and was he likely to do me a service unless amply remunerated for the same?

All these reflections swept through my mind, filling it with misgiving. I accordingly made no attempt at escape at that moment; but still walking onward with Mrs. Ferguson, racked my brain for some means to put Sawbridge's sincerity to the test. Accident very speedily seconded my views. A silk kerchief, which Mrs. Ferguson had tied round her neck above her fur cape, became detached and blew to a distance. In a moment Sawbridge was seen hurrying after it; and I, as if with a good-natured intent, suddenly broke away from Mrs. Ferguson (who was not holding me very tight at the time) and likewise sped after the kerchief. She could not think that I meant to escape on this occasion; because I was actually throwing myself in Sawbridge's way—and there-

fore she did not call after me to stop, nor exhibit any alarm as to my proceeding. Sawbridge and I overtook the kerchief at the same moment; and as he gave it to me, he said in a low rapid whisper, "Fly! I will not pursue you! I want to do you a service, to atone for that Shakspeare's Cliff affair."

"Thanks!" I answered: and with the kerchief in my hand, hastened to rejoin Mrs. Ferguson, while Sawbridge again fell considerably into the rear.

My heart was now elate with hope. Could I possibly doubt the sincerity of the man's intention to serve me? No: and my thoughts, previously wildered with doubt and misgiving, were now reeling and whirling with joy. I beheld another stile, at the end of the field which we were at the moment traversing; and I resolved to make the attempt on reaching that spot. Whither I was to go—in what direction I was to speed—or what would become of me in a district where I was an utter stranger,—all these things entered not my brain for a single moment. It was sufficient that the chance of escape was afforded me—and I was too miserable in my captivity not to resolve upon availing myself of it.

Accordingly, when we reached the stile, I threw one glance behind; and perceiving that Sawbridge was at a very considerable distance, I had not the slightest doubt as to his good faith: so that the instant I crossed the barrier, away I ran at the very height of my speed. Whether Mrs. Ferguson said anything or not, I do not remember: for I was too excited to observe anything at the moment.

On I went. The extremity of the field which I thus speedily traversed, was reached; and on looking back, a glance showed me that I was safe from pursuit. Mrs. Ferguson was still standing at the stile where I had quitted her; and Sawbridge

was now no longer to be seen. With such an exultation of spirits as I had scarcely ever known before, I continued my rapid flight: two more fields were crossed; and now I found myself in a lane which lay very low and had a high hedge on either side. For an instant I stopped short to gather breath; and as I was about to pursue my way along the lane, the sounds of a horse's hoofs reached my ears. All in a moment the idea of encountering Sir Aubrey Clavering flashed to my mind; and the thought threw me into a complete bewilderment. If I continued in the lane I must be seen by the horseman, whom I dreaded to be the Baronet: and if I retraced my way over the fields, I must fall into the power of Mrs. Ferguson again. But while I thus deliberated the horseman galloped up to the spot; and a faint shriek fell from my lips as at the first glance my suspicion seemed confirmed.

"Fear nothing!' said the traveller: and a voice which was not that of Clavering, made me look up earnestly into the face of the speaker.

Good heavens! was it possible?—the Gipsy Queen, disguised in male attire—dressed so as to make her resemble the Baronet, and with a false moustache aiding to complete the illusion!

"Mount, my dear girl!" she exclaimed, a smile showing her brilliant teeth. "I am your friend—Sawbridge has managed all this—delay not!"

Thus speaking, she helped me to mount behind her upon the horse's back; and bidding me wind my arms around her so as to retain my seat firmly, she put spurs to her steed, and away the spirited animal galloped along the lane.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE GIPSY QUEEN.

The reader is doubtless as much surprised at this incident as I myself was at the time—and perhaps even more so: for my feelings consisted not altogether of amazement; there was blended with them an exultant joy at this unexpected diversion in my favour. For instead of having fallen into the hands of Clavering, it appeared that heaven had sent me a friend, though under the most extraordinary and incomprehensible circumstances.

For ten minutes did we proceed onward without a word being exchanged. At length the Gipsy Queen reined in the steed, which by the bye she managed as admirably as Sir Aubrey Clavering or any other accomplished horseman could have done; and we emerged from the lane upon the high road at a gentle trot.

"You did not expect that your adventure would take such a turn as this?" said the Gipsy Queen.

"Assuredly I did not," was my answer. "But you must now permit me to express my deep gratitude——"

"We will talk of that presently, my dear," interrupted the woman. "Of course you know who I am? for I on my part know you well enough. It has ceased for some time past to be a secret who the negro-girl and lad were that accomplished the exploit in St. Giles's."

"Ah!" I ejaculated: "the truth of that circumstance is known, then?"

"To be sure," rejoined the Gipsy Queen, with a laugh, which was however full of good-humour. "Lord Harlesdon's servants gossipped about it after a time; and on telling the fortune of one of them I managed to elicit all the facts. It was very well done of you, Miss Price; and I can't help admiring your brave conduct on the occasion."

"You experience no animosity towards me on that account?" I asked, somewhat diffidently.

"Not the slightest," was the quick response. "I was glad to be relieved of the necessity of attending on the child; and having performed my part of the business towards those men who employed me, I did not care one farthing what followed."

"But do those men themselves know," I inquired, "that it was I who, disguised as a negro-girl on that occasion, rescued the child?"

"I really cannot say whether they do or not," she answered: "nor does it matter now. The thing is past and over; and at all events that man Sawbridge has befriended you this morning—has he not?"

"Most assuredly he has," I replied; "and what he has done for me must be held as a complete atonement for any by-gone evil which I have suffered at his hands."

"What do you think of my disguise?" asked the Gipsy Queen. "But by the bye, when I was talking to Sawbridge just now over the hedge at the bottom of the garden, did I not observe you at one of the back windows?"

"Yes—I was there; and it struck me that you were Sir Aubrey Clavering."

"Ah! then I do indeed look like Sir Aubrey Clavering?"

"Until seen close, it would be impossible to entertain any other impression," was my answer. "But wherefore have you adopted this disguise? I cannot see the necessity of it——"

"Oh! you shall understand all about it presently," rejoined the Gipsy Queen. "But you do not sit comfortably behind me: and moreover as this horse is very spirited, and indeed apt to shy, you might be thrown off and experience a very severe fall. We have yet some distance to go before I can place you in safety. You had therefore better sit before me: so that instead of your clinging in this manner to me, I shall be enabled to hold you secure on the front part of the saddle."

"Just as you please," I answered: and the Gipsy Queen accordingly made the horse stop. I then, by her aid, shifted my position, and was now seated before her. Holding the reins in her left hand, she wound her right arm about my waist; so that I half reclined as it were in her embrace. This arrangement being accomplished, she put spurs to her horse, and onward we sped again.

From the position in which I was now placed I was enabled to observe her with more attention than hitherto. Her disguise was certainly excellent. In an earlier chapter the reader has been informed that she was of a tall and commanding stature; and thus, when apparelled in male attire, she was not rendered too diminutive to play the part of Sir Aubrey Clavering. The hat that she wore was of the very shape which invariably characterized his own; and her dark hair was gathered up in such a manner that when seen at a little distance, it produced precisely the same effect as Clavering's hair, which he wore rather long. The

bold outline of her features, aided by the olive tint of her complexion, gave her a masculine look, which was enhanced by the false moustache most artistically fixed upon the upper lip. The frock-coat, buttoning close up to the chin and setting tight to her figure, actually appeared to be one lent her for the purpose by Sir Aubrey Clavering; and the same might be said of the trousers with the gold stripe down each leg. The polished boots were provided with silver spurs of the kind called "fixtures;" and thus, altogether, her apparel was the precise counterpart of the Baronet's ordinary attire.

While I was deliberating upon this disguise, and bewildering myself with conjectures to discover what on earth could be its motive, I was gradually led to survey the horse itself with increasing attention; and the idea insensibly grew up in my mind that it was Sir Aubrey Clavering's own favourite steed which now bore the Gipsy Queen and myself along. This thought began to trouble me. I did not like the mystery of the proceeding; and looking up into the woman's face, I said, "Is not this the Baronet's own horse?"

"Yes—and every article of clothing which I have on, is likewise his own," she at once responded, but without the slightest confusion in her looks or manner. "It was only by cheating *him* that I could serve *you*. Presently I will explain everything. But if you have any suspicion of my sincerity——"

"No, no," I exclaimed: "it would be most unhandsome, most ungenerous, in me to suspect you," I at once answered. "Nevertheless, you must admit that the mystery of this proceeding is quite sufficient to bewilder me, especially if you only knew how much duplicity has been practised towards me and of what deeply laid intrigues I have been made the victim."

"Poor girl!" said the Gipsy Queen, in a voice that seemed full of the sincerest, deepest sympathy: and bending her head, she kissed my forehead.

At this moment the sounds of an approaching vehicle met our ears; and it now suddenly struck me that if I were seen by any one who might happen to know me, in this position with the disguised Gipsy Queen, my reputation would be lost for ever. By the sudden start that I gave the woman doubtless comprehended what was passing in my mind: for she immediately said in the kindest possible tone, "You have nothing to fear, Miss Price: there is not the slightest chance of your encountering any one who knows you in these parts."

Nevertheless I much regretted at the instant that I had not a veil to my bonnet. But as I was about to shift my position somewhat, so as to have less the air of half-reclining in the Gipsy Queen's embrace, the horse suddenly shied; and she exclaimed, "For heaven's sake remain quiet—or we shall both be thrown!"

Terrified by the animal's swerving movement, and by the quick injunction which followed it, I did remain altogether quiet in the same position as before. But in order to understand what is about to follow, the reader must be informed that the circumstance of the horse thus shying had made the animal shift from the left hand side of the road to the right hand; and there the Gipsy Queen reined him in to a full stop, observing "Poor fellow, he is restive! We must let him stand till this vehicle has passed."

Now, by the circumstance of the horse being on the right hand side of the road, I lay in the arms of the Gipsy Queen in such a manner that my face was towards the carriage that was approaching. It advanced with the leisurely manner of an equipage that is merely taking its occupants out for an airing. But as it drew near, what words can explain the crushing amazement—and I might almost say *horror*—that seized upon me, on recognizing Lord and Lady Harlesdon inside the vehicle! The nearest window was down; and the nobleman, leaning forward, exclaimed, "Ah! Clavering, my dear fellow, how are you? But O fie! you have got pretty Mary Price as your companion!"

I heard the ejaculation of amazement, mingled perhaps with some deeper feeling, that burst from Lady Harlesdon's lips: but the next instant a dizziness seized upon me—everything disappeared from my view—and I became insensible, thus swooning in the arms of the Gipsy Queen.

How long I remained in a state of unconsciousness, I cannot tell; but I was aroused from that death-like stupor by feeling myself being lifted down from the horse. Then, on opening my eyes, I glanced wildly around; and a piercing shriek thrilled from my lips as I instantaneously caught sight of the most unwelcome countenances of Mrs. Ferguson and Anne—while Nick Sawbridge was standing at a little distance, with a malicious leer upon his repulsive features.

It was at the garden gate of the White Cottage that I was thus being handed over again to the power of my custodians. Looking up to the countenance of the Gipsy Queen, who remained seated on horseback, I at once saw by the mocking and ironical expression which was upon her really handsome features, that she indeed had all along been a willing and most hypocritical accomplice in this new treachery, as vile as it was cunning, whereof I had been made the victim. Bursting out into a torrent of tears, I resigned myself without another effort to escape (of what use would it have been?) to the charge of my enemies; and with convulsive sobs swelling in my bosom and well nigh suffocating me, I was conducted back into the cottage; while the Gipsy Queen tarried to exchange a few brief words aside with Mrs. Ferguson. She then galloped away.

When once again in the parlour of that habitation which now appeared more cheerless, more odious, more prison-like than ever, I suffered the servant-woman to remove my bonnet and cloak: for I had not the heart to do anything for myself, nor to give utterance to a word. I was abandoning myself to despair; it seemed as if all my energies had now utterly given way. The full extent of this last phase in the odious conspiracy, was lucidly comprehensive to my mind. The truth shone with the glare of a frightful light in unto my soul. Until this day I was merely wretched and miserable in my captivity: but now I felt crushed and borne down beneath a load of shame. For had not the cruellest, the most horrible device been practised in order to impress Lady Harlesdon with the conviction that I was not merely the mistress of Sir Aubrey Clavering, but that with a most open defiance of all decency I had ridden

forth on horseback reclining wantonly in his arms? O God! that my dear kind mistress—she who had loved me so well, and who, notwithstanding all her faults, had at least treated me so kindly—Oh! that *she* should have been led to conceive such a shocking idea concerning me, was enough to break my heart!

When Mrs. Ferguson returned to the room after her brief colloquy with the disguised Gipsy Queen, she saw the distressed condition into which I was plunged; and growing alarmed, poured out a glass of wine and placed it to my lips. But in a sudden paroxysm of hysterical rage, I dashed the glass from her hands; and in the wilderment of my feelings rushed towards the door with the desperate resolve of making another and last effort to escape. But the front door was locked—Anne was in the passage—and perceiving that every avenue was barred, I staggered back into the parlour and sank down exhausted on the sofa. Again did my grief find vent in a torrent of tears; and when this outburst of anguish had somewhat subsided, Mrs. Ferguson said, "It is utterly useless for you to give way to your feelings in this manner. Be a sensible girl—make the best of it—battle no longer against what may be regarded as your destiny—and I'll be bound that you will soon be happy enough."

"Infamous woman!" I exclaimed, making not the slightest attempt to subdue my indignation: "how dare you address me in these terms?"—and I started from the sofa.

"My dear girl," she at once responded, with a sort of cool resoluteness of look and manner, as if she felt herself entrenched in the security and confidence of a position which not only defied all attack but which must inevitably subdue me at last,—"my dear girl, I tell you again and again that all this childishness on your part will do no good. Come, sit down quietly, and let me explain exactly how you are situated: for the time is now come when there is not the slightest necessity to keep you in the dark any longer."

I accordingly sat down, thinking that even in the immeasurable bitterness of my woe it might be some slight shade of relief to get rid of any remaining cause for suspense and learn the worst.

"Your captivity in this place," resumed Mrs. Ferguson, "is the result of a thorough understanding between Lord Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Clavering, carried into effect by the agency of John Morley, who is neither more nor less than my son——"

"Your son?" I exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Yes," she responded coolly: "is it at all wonderful that I should have a son? Well then, John Morley is this son: but I choose to be called by the name of Ferguson. Of that however no matter: it has nothing to do with our present business. I dare say you know well enough—for you were deep in Lady Harlesdon's secrets—that Sir Aubrey Clavering heard how John Morley betrayed his amour with Lady Harlesdon to his lordship; but Sir Aubrey forgave him on condition that he would enter into a plot for carrying *you* off. It is not Lord Harlesdon who loves you: on the contrary, he hates you—because he looks upon you as the confidante of her ladyship. It is Sir Aubrey Clavering who loves you—aye, and loves you to desperation! But the agreement between Lord Harlesdon and the Baronet was to the effect that you must first be made to serve the vengeance of the former before becoming the love-companion of the latter."

I started up, resolved to hear no more: but instantaneously reflecting that for my own sake I had better hear all, I sat down again.

"You see, my dear girl," continued the infamous woman, "what an important little personage you have become, that a nobleman requires you for his vengeance and a baronet for his love; and that between them they have taken no end of trouble—spared no expense—and enlisted ever so many persons in the business. John Morley ferreted out Sawbridge and brought him down here to keep watch: for you could not possibly suppose that I and Anne should leave ourselves altogether alone with you under existing circumstances. Then, as it was necessary to find some woman to personate Clavering, Sawbridge thought of the Gipsy Queen; and she, being duly sent for, arrived in this neighbourhood yesterday. You can guess why her services were necessary: the incident of the last two hours must have opened your eyes to that part of the business: for had Clavering himself met you, my dear, you would not have lain so tranquilly in his arms as you did in those of one of your own sex. As a matter of course Sawbridge told me yesterday that he had promised to help your escape; and when we walked out just now, I let my neckerchief fly on purpose, thinking that you would seize the opportunity to exchange a few words with Sawbridge. So you perceive that on this occasion I *did* mean you to have an opportunity of escaping from me, the Gipsy Queen having already received her cue and being in readiness in the lane to play her part. The letter you saw me write yesterday was to Lord Harlesdon, bidding him take her ladyship for a drive along a certain road and at a certain hour to-day, so that the little piece of comedy might be played off upon her ladyship. Thus you see, my dear, Lady Harlesdon now believes you to be Clavering's mistress; and by creating that impression in her mind, her noble husband has consummated another step in his vengeance. Lastly, to be very plain with you, your character is gone—every one who knows anything about you will soon be informed that you are the mistress of Sir Aubrey Clavering; and therefore you may as well reap all the advantages of a position which the world already assigns you."

As all the latter portion of the hideous conspiracy developed itself, I felt the stupor of consternation come over me; and if I still remained sitting upon the sofa it was because my limbs were paralyzed and I had not energy enough to move.

"I am speaking thus frankly to you, my dear child," continued Mrs. Ferguson, "and am telling you all these things, because I wish you to understand how fixed is the resolve of Sir Aubrey Clavering to carry his point; and likewise how foolish it will be of you to refuse the realities of that brilliant position which your best friend, Lady Harlesdon, now believes that you have already assumed. Sir Aubrey Clavering entered into all this plot with Lord Harlesdon for several reasons. In the first place you scorned and rejected him when he offered you his hand; and he vowed vengeance, not only upon yourself, but likewise on the baby-

faced boy, Eustace Quentin, whom you preferred to him. Secondly, although panting for revenge, he loves you to distraction; and these seemingly opposite feelings are natural enough in certain hearts. Thirdly, Sir Aubrey Clavering felt convinced that the only way to make you accept his overtures, was by rendering you indifferent to your reputation—in plain terms, to destroy it: and this has been done to-day. Now, Miss Price, after the frank and candid style in which I have spoken, you would do well as a sensible girl to accept your destiny with a good grace—for Sir Aubrey Clavering will be here to-morrow."

During the last speech of the infamous woman, the feeling of consternation and dismay had gradually left me: my ideas grew strengthened—my mind acquired a strange clearness, horrible though it were—and my energies appeared to be rising in proportion to the emergencies of the position in which I was placed. I waited until Mrs. Ferguson had concluded her remarks; I even waited for upwards of a minute when she had done, in order to nerve myself with all my presence of mind;—and feeling that I was now armed with the courage of desperation, I rose slowly from my seat and began to address her.

"Fiend in woman's shape," I said—and my voice sounded with an awful sepulchral hollowness even to my own ears,—"you have now told me everything—the very worst; and however badly I might before have thought of you, no words are powerful enough to express the immensity of that loathing with which I now regard you. I could have scarcely believed it possible that a woman could thus deliberately and calmly reveal the utter blackness of her own heart. Rest assured that though, for the time being, you may with impunity persecute a poor helpless unoffending girl—an orphan, who has never injured you—yet that there is One above who sooner or later will visit all this dire wickedness with a terrible retribution upon your head. Alas! I do indeed perceive that the web of a hideous treachery has been most insidiously woven around me, and that its meshes appear to be rapidly closing in upon me. But I cannot forget that when the mighty ship with a thousand souls on board founders or burns at sea, yet if heaven wills that only one single individual of that multitude shall be saved, a spar to which this one may cling will be wafted by the divine hand to the shore of security. Nor can I forget that when Vesuvius vomits forth its lava-stream, though every village, and hamlet, and town upon its slopes may be overwhelmed in a common ruin, yet that the hut of the holy anchorite, though apparently placed on the most perilous height, may nevertheless escape the otherwise universal desolation. Think you, then, that with these and a thousand other similar facts before my eyes, I shall not put faith in Him who, if he wills it, can save me? All the miserable sophistry by which you have sought to lure me away from the path of virtue, I despise and scorn. No—my reputation is *not* ruined! It may suffer for a time: but think you that when the day of my deliverance comes, my tale of artlessness and truth will not be believed? Yes—and all these wicked proceedings which Lord Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Clavering have devised against me, shall redound upon their own heads!"

Having thus spoken, I quitted the parlour, leaving Mrs. Ferguson evidently stupified with astonishment. Being so bad a woman herself, she doubtless had no very good opinion of female rectitude in general; and she was therefore astonished to find that instead of succumbing beneath the weight of treachery, persecution, and cruelty, I had suddenly risen as it were above all the dangers of my position and was resolved to battle with my enemies until the very last.

Ascending to my bed-chamber, I lighted the fire, which was already laid in the grate; and scarcely had I done this when Anne made her appearance.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes," she said: but I made no answer. "Will you not come down, Miss?" she then asked.

"I have resolved," was now my reply, "never voluntarily to become the companion of Mrs. Ferguson again. Not for worlds would I of my own accord sit down to table with her. If she force herself upon me, I cannot help it: but the moment she enters this room I shall go down stairs again; and if she follow me down stairs, I shall in that case return hither. It therefore remains for her to decide to what extent she is prepared to carry her persecution."

Anne looked perplexed as I thus spoke in a firm and decisive tone. She also, as well as her mistress, was evidently amazed at the spirit I displayed. She had not thought me capable of it—or at least she had believed that the misfortune of the forenoon would have broken that spirit altogether.

"But if you persist in remaining here, Miss," she at length said, "I shall be compelled to keep you company."

"I do not ask you to stay."

"No—but you cannot be left alone."

"Then you must remain," was my answer. "Better you than Mrs. Ferguson. The part you are playing in this infamous conspiracy is comparatively a passive one, viewed in regard to the active mischief of that vile woman; and therefore, much as I hate you both, the presence of yourself is a trifle less intolerable than that of Mrs. Ferguson."

"You speak out plainly now, at all events," observed Anne with brutal coarseness.

"Those who perform infamous deeds," was my rejoinder, "must expect to be told of their infamy."

"Ah, well," ejaculated Anne, with an impudent toss of her head, "we shall yet see you brought down a peg or two."

I did not condescend to give any answer, but took up a book and affected to be reading it—although, to speak the truth, I was very far from being in a humour for any such tranquil occupation. Still Anne lingered near the door, evidently perplexed how to act. At last she said—her voice now completely changed into a coaxing tone—"Do pray go down and sit with Mrs. Ferguson. You need not talk to her unless you like. For it will be very hard to make me stick up here for so many long hours with you."

Still I gave no answer, but kept my eyes fixed on the book, as I sat in front of the fire. The servant, after lingering for nearly a minute longer decided upon quitting the room—doubtless for

the purpose of consulting Mrs. Ferguson. In a short time she returned, saying, "Well, Miss, if you are resolved to stay here by yourself, you must be locked in; and don't think of trying to escape by the window, for a sharp look-out will be kept. I suppose you mean me to bring your dinner up?"

"Nothing but some bread and some water," was my answer.

"What! do you think we should put poison in your victuals?"

"I am justified in suspecting any treachery."

I heard some subdued expression of bitter annoyance, like a rage that was crushed at the very instant when about to burst forth: and then the door was slammed violently, the key immediately turning in the lock. Shortly afterwards the servant-woman re-appeared, bringing a tray containing two or three dishes—some wine—a loaf of bread, and a jug of water.

"Take everything away," said I, "except the bread and the water."

"Mrs. Ferguson declares that you must have your proper meals, Miss," answered Anne.

"Do as I tell you," I exclaimed, in a peremptory tone. "Take those dishes away, or I will fling them out of the window."

"Do you mean that?" she asked, looking very hard at me.

"I do," was my response.

"I don't think it," she observed, with impudent coolness, and quitted the room.

"Now," thought I, "it is time I should convince these people that so far from breaking my spirit, they will only excite it to the fullest extent of its power and vitality. If I yield I am lost. If I rebel against them in every way and manifest my own will as often as possible, they will grow tired of thwarting me; perhaps they will even become intimidated and overawed, so that when they make their report to Sir Aubrey Claverius, he may find his own infamous purpose weakened in proportion as he sees that mine grows stronger?"

Having made these reflections, I opened the window and tossed forth everything that the tray contained, except the loaf of bread and the pitcher of water. With these I sat down and was commencing my frugal meal, when I heard the heavy footsteps of Mrs. Ferguson rushing up the stairs; and bursting into the room, she exclaimed, "You wicked wilful girl, what is the meaning of this?"

"I desired the servant to remove certain things," was my calm and resolute reply, "and she refused to do so. I have therefore disposed of them as I threatened."

"Your conduct is most ridiculous—you cannot possibly do yourself any good by such proceedings. But where are you going?" she demanded, as I endeavoured to pass her by.

"If you intend to remain in this room," I replied, "it is my intention to go down to the parlour."

"Come, Mary, my dear," said Mrs. Ferguson, suddenly adopting her most soothing tone, and endeavouring to catch me by the hand,—"don't go on like this——"

"Do not touch me, wretch!" I cried, snatching back my hand as if from the contact of a viper.

She grew purple in the face, and was evidently on the point of blurting forth the expressions of her wrath, when suddenly curbing her indignation, she said, "Well, remain in your own room then, if you like. I will not intrude myself on you any more."

Having thus spoken, she turned away; and I went back to my seat. The door was closed—I heard the key turn in the lock—and then Mrs. Ferguson descended the stairs, but evidently with the slow pace of one deliberating profoundly as she proceeded. I could not help feeling that I had already gained a victory: I had secured the enjoyment of my own chamber to myself. For solitude was indeed now an indescribable relief, when the alternative must be the companionship of either of the two bad women who acted as my gaolers. What to me was the circumstance of the door being locked? For sixteen days had the house been a prison; and now at least I enjoyed the luxury of communing with myself unobserved in my own cell.

The time passed very slowly away; for I could not read, and I could not work. For about two hours after my dinner of bread and water, I stood at the window in the hope that some stranger might pass by; in which case I was resolved to implore assistance. But when a living being did presently come in sight, and my heart began to flutter with expectation, it proved to be only the treacherous villain Sawbridge, who was lurking about. Him in this manner I beheld several times; but no other human soul met my eye. It was soon dark at that season of the year; and closing the curtains, I lighted a candle. At tea-time Anne came up and asked me what I would have. I replied that I would take some tea if I were permitted to make it myself; but otherwise I should drink water. She looked very bitter, but spoke not another word; and when she quitted the room, I thought to myself, "Thus far they are vanquished. They have evidently agreed between them to yield to my will as far as they are able."

Anne brought up a tray containing the tea-equipage, and also a kettle of hot water, which she placed upon the fire. She then withdrew. I carefully rinsed out the teapot; for I was really afraid of some narcotic being mixed with my food, so as to throw me powerless into the hands of my arch-persecutor Sir Aubrey Clavering: for what guarantee had I that he was not concealed somewhere about the premises or in the neighbourhood? After tea I felt somewhat refreshed by the stimulating beverage; and giving way to my reflections, I experienced no small amount of consolation and courage while meditating upon the extraordinary interposition of Providence at various times to rescue persons from those perils whence by mortal agency alone there seemed no possible issue.

When bed-time arrived, Anne made her appearance with her countenance smoothed down into her wonted aspect of honest and well-meaning respectfulness: for, as I have before said, her features habitually had a look but too well calculated to serve as a mask for the blackness of her heart. She spoke not a word; and I remained profoundly silent. When we were each in our bed and she wished me "Good night," I did not answer her. The words "Good night" convey a blessing, no matter in how meaningless a way the phrase is often uttered; and I could not be guilty of such an hypocrisy as to allow my lips to breathe a blessing

towards one who was leagued with others to accomplish my ruin.

When I arose in the morning I persisted in keeping my chamber; and when I desired the breakfast-things to be brought up to me, the wish was obeyed without a moment's hesitation, much less a murmur. I was not even asked to descend and take my meal with Mrs. Ferguson: nor did that woman herself come near me. After breakfast I drew near the window and endeavoured to do some needle-work. Although the day was splendidly fine, I knew very well that if I asked to go out, it could only be accompanied and followed by individuals whose very sight was loathsome; and therefore, when Anne came to take away the breakfast-things, I said nothing upon the subject. But I could not work. Though still armed with a courage and a resolution the extent of which even surprised myself, I could not settle my attention upon any particular occupation. For I knew that a terrible ordeal was before me. Sir Aubrey Clavering, according to what Mrs. Ferguson had said, was to visit the White Cottage this day!

It was about noon when I heard the sounds of a horse's feet trampling over the hard ground; and, for an instant, not colder was the ice-chill without than that which shot through my heart. But I braced myself as it were with all my energies; and when I beheld him whom I considered my mortal enemy ride up to the gate, I felt fully prepared to meet him and reason with him upon the atrocity of his conduct towards me. He passed round through the field to the back part of the house, where I had no doubt that Sawbridge was to act as his groom: for to all appearances he had come unattended by any servant of his own.

Five minutes elapsed—and I cannot say that this interval was altogether free from painful suspense. At length I heard his footsteps in the passage below—Mrs. Ferguson's voice greeting him—and then the parlour door closing. Ten minutes more elapsed. "Ah," thought I, "Mrs. Ferguson is telling him all that has taken place, and how I have shown my spirit. Some one now comes up-stairs!"

And I recognized Anne's footsteps. In a few moments she entered the chamber, saying, "Miss, Sir Aubrey Clavering requests your presence in the parlour."

Then, to the evident surprise of the woman, who had no doubt expected another "scene" and a farther display of my spirit, I at once issued from the chamber, and descending the stairs, proceeded with firm step to the parlour.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MY PERSECUTOR.

I FELT a strange courage in my heart—but yet I knew that I was very pale, and that my lips even quivered—as I entered the room. The first glance showed me that Mrs. Ferguson had left it; and I was therefore alone with Sir Aubrey Clavering. He was standing before the fire—evidently with a certain agitation of manner, although he essayed to carry it off with an air of self-sufficiency and confidence. I closed the door behind me, and advanced towards the table, so as to place it between him and me. I then stood still, with my eyes not exactly cast down, but yet not fixed on his countenance. I wished to show a strength of moral courage, without the admixture of overweening boldness.

"Mary," he began, "will you sit down and talk to me quietly?"

"That is exactly what I desire," was my answer, as I took a chair. "I wished to converse calmly with you for a few minutes; because I think that you must have formed some very erroneous idea of my character in order to act as you have done."

"It is precisely because I understand your character so well," he replied, sitting down near the fire, "that I have acted in this manner."

"But are you not aware, Sir Aubrey Clavering," I demanded, "that you have violated the law towards me, and have rendered yourself amenable to a court of justice? Besides, I am not so ignorant of the world as to imagine that if the proper authorities were applied to, you would be permitted to continue as an officer in a regiment."

"All these things," replied the Baronet, with the utmost coolness, "I have well weighed and considered, and have made up my mind to risk the result. Perhaps you will listen patiently to me for a minute or two. I am a rich man—well-connected—and having powerful friends. These advantages you do not possess. Were a warfare to commence between us, who would be the gainer—you or I? I know full well that silly or ignorant people, when they are aggrieved, ever talk most glibly of invoking the law: but they should reflect that the law is a coquette to be wooed only by a well-lined purse. Rich people, my dear girl, can do exactly what they choose, short of murder or anything downright heinous; and even in those cases will money, rank, and station, go a very great way towards helping them through the difficulty. Do you want proofs of all this? A corroboration is to be found in the fact that thousands and thousands of poor girls—I mean poor in pocket, understand—annually fall into the power of rich men; and of these innumerable cases, how many ever attract public notice or are brought before a court of justice? Not one in five hundred! And why? Because money is all-powerful in this country, and can hush up anything. Now then, my dear Mary, think you that I am to be terrified by threats of an appeal to the law?"

"Granting then, sir," I said, "that all you have put forward is exactly the truth, do you not think that you are playing a cowardly, mean, and ungentlemanly part to avail yourself of the immunities of rank and wealth to persecute me whom you have admitted to be a poor, friendless, humble girl?"

"We will not discuss the morality of the thing," observed Sir Aubrey, with an ironical smile. "Men in my position are not accustomed to stand on such punctilios; and I do not mean to constitute an exception to the general rule. It is sufficient that my wealth and my station afford me the power of ministering to all my pleasures; and while I live I shall not fail to use these advantages."

I was about to warn him once more not to be too confident in the boasted impunity with which he alleged that rich men might perpetrate any wickedness,—when a sickening sensation was carried to my heart by the sudden recollection of how Lord Harles-

don had been able, for a moment, to trample upon Leonard Percival, who indeed would have been altogether crushed except through my intervention; and I beheld in all that proceeding a terrible illustration of the truth of what Sir Aubrey Clavering had been saying. The words, therefore, which I was about to utter, died upon my lips; and I sat silent and unhappy.

"I have already told you, Mary," continued Sir Aubrey Clavering, "that I love you. Was I not explicit enough upon this head some weeks ago, when I offered you my hand, and you rejected me? Ah! think you that I have forgotten the scene which took place on that occasion? think you I cease to remember how I left you in the lane with my rival in your affections? and could you now ask if I have anything to resent—anything to revenge? Mary, there have been moments when I have loved and hated you at the same time; but never moments when I have ceased to love you altogether! No—for I do love you—and passionately, devotedly—at times with a sort of frenzy which is utterly beyond my control. Even therefore if I dreaded the law, I would not desist from the course which I am pursuing towards you. No—I will persevere in it, though the very scaffold itself loomed in the perspective!"

While giving utterance to the latter portion of his speech, the Baronet's voice swelled into an impassioned excitement—his countenance grew flushed—and his eyes seemed to flash forth fire. He rose from his seat, but did not advance towards me. I also started from my chair, and stood with vanishing courage—pale and trembling—in his presence. I felt that I had to do with a man desperate in his wickedness.

"Mrs. Furguson has told me," he continued, "how, since yesterday, you have shown a strange spirit——"

"Sir," I suddenly exclaimed, my indignation fired by the mention of that infamous woman's name; "how is it possible that you—a gentleman—could have allowed yourself to make use of such vile instruments as these women who are acting as my gaolers? Think you that I have no modesty to be shocked—no sense of shame to be outraged—by the contact of such wretches? And more than this, you have placed as a spy upon my movements when I walk abroad, a man of the most infamous character—a man who once endeavoured to make away with me—yes, to murder me at Dover——"

"Ah! is this possible?" ejaculated Sir Aubrey, startled by the announcement.

"It is true, I solemnly declare it! But more than that," I continued; "he is one of the gang who caused little innocent Bella to be carried off; and that very gipsy woman whom you have likewise taken into your service, was the one who, aided by her mother, robbed the child from Jemima!"

"I was not aware of all this," observed the Baronet, evidently astonished as well as deeply vexed by these revealings. "Morley conducted it all," he added in a musing tone; "he ferreted out the persons necessary for my purpose——but he should have been more careful——"

"Ah, Sir Aubrey Clavering!" I said, thinking and hoping that I had led him into a train of reflection which might possibly tend to the softening of his heart; "I am about to make an allusion which, heaven knows, I would not even whisper for worlds, were it not for the purpose of appealing to the best feelings of your nature. For it is impossible you can be without such feelings! O sir, if you do indeed possess them, I adjure you thereby to remember that it was I who rescued the child ——*your child*——from those wretches of whom I have been speaking!"

"Mary," Sir Aubrey suddenly exclaimed, "if you had saved my life—if you had delivered me from the most horrible of tortures—in short, if you had done me the greatest possible service which one human being can render to another,—still I would not renounce that hope which my heart now cherishes! No—for I am not master of myself. In every other circumstance that engages my attention, I can be cool, calm, and collected. But when I think of you—when your image rises up to my mind——and it is almost ever there——I grow excited, bewildered, maddened! Oh, as I behold you now, pale and trembling as you are—yet beautiful—oh! so beautiful—and with something about you which I cannot find words to express, but which is infinitely more ravishing than even your loveliness—I feel that I could sell my soul to Satan in order to make you mine!"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, shuddering to the deepest confines of my being: "how can you talk of experiencing any regard for one whom you persecute thus bitterly? Sir Aubrey Clavering, I do implore and beseech you to let me depart hence. If you do, I swear most solemnly that I will, to the best of my ability, fling a veil over all these proceedings on your part. Oh! bethink you, it is the poor friendless orphan who offers up this prayer to you, a powerful rich man! Depend upon it that if you grant my prayer, the day will come—yes it *must* come—when you will rejoice in having behaved with mercy and forbearance. Do, Sir Aubrey Clavering—do, I beseech you, hear my prayer!"—and I clasped my hands, while the tears streamed down my face.

"But why *can* you not love me? why *will* you not love me?" he demanded, with an increasing excitement of voice and manner. "Have I not already afforded you sufficient indications of my desire to minister unto your happiness? When you arrived at this cottage, you were shown rich dresses and splendid jewels, all of which I purchased for you: but they are nothing in comparison with the wealth and the riches that I will shower upon you. Consent to love me—seal my happiness here, beneath this roof—and to-morrow I will bear you away in a carriage to whatsoever part of the country you may choose—to London if you like—and there you shall have a mansion, equipages, servants——But heavens! what is the matter?"

I had sunk down upon my chair, and was falling back with a sensation of faintness, as these proffers—so outrageous to my feelings—instead of coming like golden temptations upon my soul, struck upon my brain as if with successive blows of a hammer.

"No, no—come not near me!" I cried, hysterically starting up from the swoon into which a moment before I had been sinking. "Hear me, Sir Aubrey Clavering—hear me once for all! I do not love you—I cannot love you—not for worlds

could I love you! Tho very name of love seems to be polluted when uttered by your lips. I see that I was wrong to appeal to you, even by the recollection of that sweet innocent child whom at the peril of my life I rescued from a gang of miscreants:—I see also that you are inaccessible to every sentiment of humanity, generosity, and goodness——"

"Yes, yes—I am where you are concerned!" he exclaimed, with frenzied excitement.

"Then hear me!" I cried. "If you dare menace me farther, I will resist you to the utmost. Nay, I will possess myself of a knife; and without hesitation will I plunge it into your heart!"

"Mary, you rave—you are mad!"

"No—I am resolved and determined."

"But all this is childish—ridiculous!"

"It is fraught with terrible solemnity for us both," I exclaimed. "Sooner than go forth into the world and be compelled to blush when looking in the face of those who know me, I will even put an end to my own existence. O God, forgive me," I exclaimed, in a wild tone, "for being forced to utter so dreadful a threat: but I swear that I will perish—yes, perish by my own hand—rather than become degraded and disgraced!"

With these words I moved towards the door: but Sir Aubrey Clavering sprang after me; and catching me by the arm, he said in a voice that was hoarse but terrible with mingled rage and passion, "Mary, think not to escape me thus. I swear by heaven that you shall be mine!"

"Never!" I cried, with a feeling as if my senses were leaving me.

"I give you twenty-four hours to reflect——"

"I do not need a moment!"

"Rash and insensate girl! You are a feather contending with a whirlwind!" retorted the Baronet. "Four-and-twenty hours do I give you: and then——You understand me! Now go to your

chamber, if you will:"—and abruptly releasing my arm, which for half a minute he had held with a force as if it were in an iron vice, he walked hurriedly back to the fire-place.

Quitting the room, I ascended to my own chamber; where I sat down in a sort of bewilderment, wondering whether all that had just taken place were a reality, or only a hideous dream. But in a few minutes Anne made her appearance to ask whether I would have dinner brought up—for it was now one o'clock. Then all the frightful truthfulness of my position flaming up as it were in my mind, I started with hysterical wildness from my chair, exclaiming, "No—I will take nothing—I require no food of any sort. Leave me."

She accordingly turned away without speaking a word, and left the room, locking the door behind her. A flood of tears partially relieved me; and when the extreme bitterness of my anguish had thus found vent, I dried my eyes and sat down to revolve the plans of escape which began to crowd thick in upon my mind. But alas! they were nothing more than the same that I had often thought of before, during my captivity at the White Cottage; and none seemed feasible. So desperate, however, was my position that it was no wonder if, like a drowning person in death's struggles, I clutched at every passing straw. Should I escape by the window? No: for instantaneous recapture must follow. Should I affect a yielding disposition towards the Baronet and thus throw him off his guard? No: that scheme had already failed with the two women; and moreover it shocked my delicacy to think of simulating any sentiment of a favourable character towards my arch-persecutor. Should I endeavour to pick the lock of the door and steal down stairs on the chance of being able to fly from the house? No: detection would be inevitable. Should I endeavour to eludo Anne's vigilance during the night? Alas! what hope was there of success therein? for never once during the sixteen days of my captivity, had I failed, when awaking in the night, to find that she was awake also. What then was to be done? I knew not.

The hours pass away—darkness had set in—I had closed the curtains—the candle was lighted upon the table. I felt faint and exhausted for want of food. Very little had I eaten on the previous day—nothing with my breakfast on the morning of this one—and I had taken no dinner. Therefore when Anne came up at the regular hour and asked if I would have tea, I replied in the affirmative, on condition that I might make it for myself. The tray was accordingly brought up; and I partook of a cup of tea and a slice of bread. When my repast was over, I again abandoned myself to my reflections,—conjuring up the wildest schemes for effecting an escape, but constrained to abandon each one as impracticable.

It was about eight o'clock when I suddenly heard Sir Aubrey Clavering's voice in the passage below, talking loud and angrily.

"What the deuce more can the fellow want?" he exclaimed. "I have sent him ten guineas beyond the stipulated sum; and you say he is not satisfied?"

A voice which I recognised to be that of Anne, made some answer; but the words did not reach my ears.

"Oh!" ejaculated Clavering, who appeared to be very angry indeed: "he says that he has been here longer than at first agreed upon—eh? Well, the ten guineas are ample remuneration for his overtime. The fact is, if I had known that he was such a thorough-paced rascal as he is, he never should have come here at all. Mary Price told me terrible things about him this morning. However, I don't want to quarrel with the scoundrel——"

Here Anne said something again; and Mrs. Ferguson's voice likewise mingled in the colloquy: but I could not catch what either of them said.

"Oh well," continued Clavering, "if you don't like to talk to the fellow any more about the matter, tell him to come to me. I don't mind giving him another five guineas, since you suggest its prudence, Mother Ferguson: but I can't say that I like to submit to such bare-faced extortions."

I then heard, by the sounds of the Baronet's footsteps, that he re-entered the parlour:—doubtless to await the coming of Sawbridge from the outhouse: for that Sir Aubrey's anger had been excited by the avarice of that individual, was clear enough. A gleam of hope gradually stole into my mind. There was evidently a dispute between the employer and the employed: might it not turn to my advantage? I knew enough of Sawbridge's character to be well aware that he was capable of anything: would he, then, hesitate to turn round upon the Baronet either through revenge or any other motive? The longer I thought upon all this, the more interested did I become in the issue of that dispute a portion of whose commencement I had overheard.

In a few minutes the sounds of a man's heavy feet in the passage below reached my ears; and approaching the chamber-door, I listeneded with breathless suspense at the keyhole. But this time the conversation did not take place in the passage: Sawbridge was evidently introduced to the parlour; and therefore, though the door of that room remained open, I could hear nothing beyond the murmur of voices. For five minutes did the conversation, whatever it were about, last in the parlour; and then I heard persons come forth into the passage. The front door opened; and Sawbridge said, "Well, Sir Aubrey, I hope you won't think none the worse of me for trying to get as much as I could——"

"Let no more be said upon the subject," rejoined the Baronet's voice. "You have got what you asked; and now that your services are no longer required here, you can go and revel in your gains."

"And so I will, sir," answered Sawbridge; "although I have got a deceutish walk of six miles before I reach——"

"Hush—don't speak so loud!" interposed Mrs. Ferguson.

"I have told you," said the Baronet, "that if you choose to remain in your old quarters until to-morrow, you are perfectly welcome: but as I have now come here to stay for the present, and there is no necessity for you to be about the premises any longer, I thought you would like to get off without delay."

"And so I do, sir," responded Sawbridge. "That outhouse was precious lonesome, and I shan't be sorry to bid it good bye."

"Well, away with you then," cried the Baronet, as if somewhat impatient of this colloquy.

"Good night, Sir Aubrey. Good night, Mrs Ferguson. Good bye, Anne:"—and away went

Nick Sawbridge, the front door closing behind him.

I returned to my seat with all my temporarily awakened hope utterly prostrated: for it was evident that Sawbridge and the Baronet had parted on good terms; and I said to myself in mournful soliloquy, "The dispute is made up: nothing will arise from it!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A CHANGE.

Soon after ten o'clock Anne came up-stairs as usual, to go to bed. She locked the door, and began bustling about the room according to her invariable habit, so that she might have an opportunity of concealing the key—a precaution which, in consequence of her ever vigilant watchfulness and easy wakefulness, appeared very unnecessary. But perceiving that I made not the slightest preparation for retiring to rest, she asked, "Shall I assist you, Miss, to take off your things?"

"No," was my answer: and I kept my seat near the fire.

"Do you not mean to go to bed yet?" she inquired.

"Neither yet, nor all night," I rejoined.

She stared at me with some degree of astonishment, and at length observed, "You need not be afraid of anything. Didn't you see me lock the door?"

"Yes—and also hide the key," was my response. "But those who hide can find; and those who lock can unlock. In the same way that I have taken precautions against eating drugged food, will I endeavour to guard against any outrage that may be contemplated during the night."

"On my soul, Miss Price, you are wrong!" exclaimed Anne vehemently.

"Do you suppose that I should take your word for anything?" I asked. "And now have the goodness to cease addressing your observations to me."

The woman gave a sort of sullen grunt, and slowly proceeded to disapparel herself. She doubtless thought I was merely giving myself airs or showing off my spirit, but that I should presently yield to sleepiness and be glad to lie down. But I sat quietly in my chair, looking at the fire and giving way to my reflections: for I had firmly resolved to sit up all night. The servant-woman lingered a very long time over her own preparations for going to bed; and when at last she was ready, but I still gave no sign of following her example, she said, "You had better think twice of it; for you will be regularly worn out by morning."

I made no answer; and she stepped into her own bed, though evidently with some degree of reluctance. No doubt she thought that my object was to weary her out, watch till she was asleep, and then make an attempt at flight; so she lay awake, every now and then giving me an intimation by a short cough that she was not asleep.

More than an hour had thus passed—Anne was still wide awake—and I remained seated in my chair without the slightest sensation of weariness. She was now desperately angry; and starting suddenly up in her bed, exclaimed, "I tell you what it is!—this is the height of folly! You only do it to vex and annoy me, because you know I am tired after a hard day's work. If you don't go to bed I will jump up and blow out the candle."

"I will save you the trouble," said I, at once extinguishing it.

"Provoking puss that you are!" said the woman bitterly. "But if you don't go to bed I will come and throw a pitcher of water over the fire."

"That you assuredly shall *not* do," I replied: "and if you dare attempt it, I will beat you away from the fire-place with the poker. You shall not trample me under foot."

Another sullen grunt—and the woman lay down. Slowly passed the time, and still did she continue awake: but gradually on my part did a sensation of drowsiness steal upon me. Two or three times I started up in my chair to shake it off: but return it would—till at length my ideas fell into confusion; and if I were not actually asleep, at all events I was in a state of what may be termed dreamy repose. I cannot say how long this lasted: but I was suddenly startled by hearing a loud cry of "Help! murder! thieves!" ringing all through the house.

It was Clavering's voice, sounding from an adjacent apartment. I started up, feeling as if awakening from a hideous dream.

"Good God, what is that?" exclaimed Anne, springing from her bed.

"Help! murder! thieves!" still rang through the house, now accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of a fierce struggle in the adjoining room. Then the door of Mrs. Ferguson's chamber, which was exactly opposite mine, opened suddenly; and her voice was heard shrieking out, "What in heaven's name is the matter?"

"Silence, you old beldame—or we will do for you!" thundered forth a fearful voice, which I instantaneously recognized to be that of Ben Bulldog.

Anne fell upon her knees, breaking out into the bitterest lamentations; and I myself was so terrified that I knew not whether to hope or dread the most from what was now going on. The truth however had already flashed to my mind: Sawbridge was no doubt at the bottom of the burglary which was being perpetrated!

"Don't hurt her, Ben," exclaimed another voice on the landing, accompanied by the tread of heavy footsteps: and this voice I also recognized: it was that of Long Joe, the man whom I had seen at the *Trampers' Arms* in St. Giles's. "There, that's right—throw a cord about her—tie her old hands and feet. The Baronet's safe enough—he is bound in every limb, and Sawbridge is fastening the cord to the bed-post."

While Long Joe was thus speaking, there was a great struggling on the landing, accompanied by frequent outbursts of screaming on the part of Mrs. Ferguson, together with certain brief but expressive ejaculations on that of the Bulldog—such as, "Come, keep quiet—lie still now—hold your jaw, you old wretch!"—and the like.

All that had hitherto occurred scarcely occupied three minutes, though it has taken much longer to describe: and now there was a thundering knock at my chamber-door, with peremptory commands to open it, from the united voices of the Bulldog, Sawbridge, and Long Joe.

"You *must* open it," said I to Anne. "Where

is the key? For heaven's sake do not irritate them! Besides, they will burst it in!"

"There, there, Miss!" said the terrified woman, drawing forth the key from underneath her own pillow.

"Give it to me," I said, perceiving that her hand trembled so she could not have put it into the lock. "Now throw a shawl over your shoulders while I let them in."

Thus speaking, I at once opened the door with a presence of mind which arose from the certainty I had acquired that murder was not being done, but that the villains had contented themselves with merely securing the Baronet and Mrs. Ferguson by means of cords. I was not therefore apprehensive of being more severely dealt with by them: and perhaps I had a rapid presentiment that the result would be advantageous to myself. At all events my position at the cottage just previous to their arrival was so dreadful that it could scarcely be made worse; and even death at their hands were preferable to dishonour at those of Sir Aubrey Clavering.

The door was opened—and in burst the three men. The light from the fire showed me their well-known countenances, as it likewise revealed to them both myself and Anne. The Bulldog came first—Long Joe was second—Sawbridge brought up the rear.

"Now then, young Miss," said the ferocious Bulldog, who as a matter of course at once recognized me, "where are all these pretty things that you told Sawbridge about? If we find them it will be well for you. If we don't——"

"Well, Ben," interrupted Sawbridge, "it's no use bullying the gal. Let's look in the cupboards."

"Aye, that's it," said Long Joe: and shutting the door, he leant his back against it.

The Bulldog and Sawbridge lighted a candle, opened the cupboard, and found the objects of their cupidity. A brutal smile expanded upon the almost noseless countenance of the former, and a reptile-like satisfaction gleamed from the eyes of the latter, as they dragged forth all the rich silks and satins, together with the jewel-box.

"By jingo!" exclaimed Long Joe, advancing from the door to the table where all those things were now displayed; "this was well worth coming for!"—then turning to me, he observed, "I ought to owe you a grudge, Miss Price, for playing Miss Timbuctoo over us at the *Trampers' Arms;* for we have found it all out since: but as it's through you we have got such a good haul here, I can't find it in my heart to do you a mischief. You looked pretty enough as Miss Ebony, but a deuced deal prettier as you are now."

"I tell you what it is, Miss Mary," said the Bulldog, now fixing his eyes on me; "although you did play us that precious scurvy trick that Long Joe has been talking of, yet as you didn't set the traps upon us for either that or the little business at Dover, we don't want to be hard upon you. So put on your things and tramp off at once."

Reader, it would be impossible to conceive the joy which suddenly sprang up in my heart at these words: nor as he uttered them did the Bulldog seem at the moment the horrible hideous monster that he really was. Need I say that I was not very long in availing myself of the permission thus granted? Throwing on my bonnet and cloak, but forgetting to take my purse which lay upon the chest of drawers, I turned to speed from the chamber.

"Miss Price, for God's sake speak a good word for me!" exclaimed Anne, who was cowering down in awful tribulation in the remotest corner of the room.

"You won't be hurt if you hold your tongue," exclaimed Sawbridge, addressing the servant. "And now be off, Miss Price."

I opened the door, and the next moment was in the landing, where Mrs. Ferguson lay bound with cords and groaning bitterly. I really pitied her notwithstanding all she had done against me: but I dared not offer to assist her—nor was I in a humour to pause, now that the avenue of flight was open to me. She said something in an imploring tone: but I did not answer her. I knew her life was safe, as the burglars evidently did not mean to push matters to unnecessary extremities; and I had therefore the less compunction in leaving her as she was. As I passed the open door of the room where Sir Aubrey Clavering lay, I heard him give vent to a bitter imprecation: but precipating myself down stairs, I quickly drew back the bolts of the front door. It was however locked, and the key had been taken away, most likely by Mrs. Ferguson or the Baronet himself on retiring to rest. Nothing discouraged, I sped to the back door, and found it wide open, thus disclosing the means whereby the burglars had entered. Another instant and I was in the open air. As if wings were fastened to my feet, I traversed the garden and entered the fields; and then I went rushing on through the clear moonlight, impelled by one only remaining terror, which was that the burglars might repent of having suffered me to escape and come in pursuit. But this alarm proved totally unfounded; and having run till I was altogether breathless, I slackened my pace. Still I walked as quickly as I could, not caring which direction I took so long as every fresh step lengthened the distance between myself and the White Cottage.

Indeed, I pursued my way at random,—being, as the reader is already aware, utterly ignorant of my whereabouts. I knew not in what part of the country I was, nor which path to take in order to reach the nearest town. But for the first hour of my escape this ignorance on my part troubled me not: I was so unfeignedly rejoiced at my deliverance that the elevation of my spirits would not allow of any misgiving. At last I felt so tired that I was compelled to sit down upon the step of a stile which I reached. Here, in the depths of my soul, I returned thanks to the all-seeing One for this sudden change in my fortunes: and then, so overcome was I by my feelings, that I wept plenteously. I remembered all that I had said on the previous day to Mrs. Ferguson relative to the power of Him to rescue one amongst a thousand mariners on board a foundering or burning vessel, as well as to save the humble grotto of the anchorite even near the crater's verge when the burning mount vomits forth the lava-flood that overwhelms villages, towns, and cities. Yes, of all this I thought as I poured forth my thanksgiving to heaven, and wept copious tears of gratitude in the utter loneliness, the silence, and the moonlight of the scene.

After resting a short space, I rose and continued

my way across the fields. Every now and then I stood still to look around and see if I could catch any glimmering light to indicate a human habitation. But in vain. Doubtless amidst the trees there must have been an occasional hut or cottage—perhaps even a mansion: but if so, they were too much blended with the darkness of the scenery to catch my eye. For though the moon was shining, yet all objects at a little distance were confused and dark. Besides, at that hour, which I judged to be near two in the morning, it was not at all probable that any light would be gleaming from the windows of dwellings.

The air was very chill: it pierced through my thick cloak, to the very marrow of my bones. For the first hour of my escape I was in a fever-heat from excitement of spirits and from speed of pace: but that rest at the stile had chilled me—and as I was now thoroughly wearied, I could not drag myself along quickly enough to sustain a proper degree of warmth in my body. My teeth chattered—my blood seemed gradually stagnating in my veins: I moreover felt very hungry—for the reader will remember how little I had been able to eat for the last two days. Cold, want, and weariness rapidly produced a depression of spirits. Vainly did I endeavour to cheer myself with the circumstance of my escape. The exciting joy and exultant triumph of that occurrence were yielding to a rapidly increasing sense of exhaustion—until I began to feel downright miserable. I dared not stop and sit again: I was afraid of actually perishing with the cold. I felt that if I allowed my limbs to become altogether stiffened with the ice-chill of the air, I might be unable to rise up again: and therefore did I continue to drag myself onward.

Presently, at the extremity of a long range of fields, I observed an object a-head which seemed to be a dwelling; and quickening my pace as well as I could, I advanced towards it. To my joy I perceived that it gradually broke from obscure shapelessness into the outlines of a large mansion, with tall chimneys, antique gables, a portico in front, and outhouses at the sides. On approaching a little nearer, I saw that it stood in the midst of a small park, or paddock, with a high railing all round and a great gate at the entrance of the carriage-way: and on issuing from the field, I found myself in a lane skirting the enclosure. With the resolution of ringing the bell and craving admission, if only to sleep in a barn or a shed, I approached the gate: but just as my hand grasped the handle of the bell-wire which was fixed in the gate-post, a hideous barking of dogs arose—and down the carriage-way inside the paddock rushed three or four of those animals as if to tear me to pieces. With a scream of affright I darted away from the spot, and sped along the lane for several minutes, as if no such feeling as that of weariness had ever been experienced by me at all. Indeed, it was a mortal terror that thus impelled me on; and as the dogs continued barking, I at first fancied that they were in full pursuit. But I suppose they could not get through the gate, the bars being too close together. When the panic which thus inspired me had subsided and I knew that I was safe from any pursuit on the part of those ferocious animals, all my weariness returned—with a more crushing power too than before; and I was compelled to sit down on a bank under a hedge.

I felt the tears trickling down my cheeks. Oh! if the inmates of the mansion I had just passed knew that while they were slumbering in their comfortable warm beds, a fellow-creature—and that fellow-creature a poor helpless girl—had been driven away by savage dogs from their gate, could they have slept on in peace? Alas, alas! the idea struck me that many and many a houseless wanderer, as I then was, thus often passes by the dwellings of his fellow-creatures by night, only to feel his own misery with the greater poignancy, because reminded of the luxurious repose in which the others are pillowed!

Wiping away my tears, and again warned by the stiffening of my limbs that to linger on that dewy bank was to court *death*, I rose from my seat and dragged myself painfully along the lane. But I began to reflect that such a fine mansion as the one I had just passed was not likely to be altogether isolated, and that there would perhaps be the humbler habitations of farm-labourers in the neighbourhood. Perhaps a hamlet or village? So I went on, cheered by the hopefulness of these reflections. And sure enough, at the end of the lane, about half a mile from the mansion, there was a neat little cottage-like residence. Approaching the door, I knocked—but with great timidity. For two or three minutes I waited: my summons remained unanswered: no sound of any one moving within reached my ears—no light appeared at any of the windows. I knocked again—a little louder this time. In about a minute one of the upper windows was opened, and a head with a white cotton night-cap was thrust forth.

"Who's there?" demanded in a gruff voice the man whom I had thus aroused from his slumbers.

"For heaven's sake," I said in a piteous tone, which was very far from being assumed, "let me come in and rest a little while; and give me a mouthful of food—for I am perishing with cold and hunger!"

"No, no—we don't take in trampers," was the brutal response: and before I could give utterance to another word, the head popped in—the window was banged down—and all was silence again.

Though my whole form was so icy cold, yet did I weep scalding tears as I dragged myself away from that inhospitable dwelling. Heavens! what would become of me? I dared not sit down again: and I was wearied—Oh! so wearied—that I felt as if I must drop in the road, crushed by the weight of fatigue. Yet I continued to drag myself along: but more intense became the chill—for it was now, as well as I could guess, near three o'clock on that wintry morning. If I could but reach some village or hamlet where there was a tavern or public-house, I might obtain a bed. But, ah! as this hope—for an instant fraught with a cheering effect—arose in my mind, it was accompanied by a terrible misgiving. I thrust my hand into my pocket: my purse was not there! I felt upon my finger through my gloves: and alas! the ring which, as the reader will remember, was the gift of Lady Harlesdon, had likewise been left behind me! I was penniless — and without anything of value about me that could be converted into money or offered as a security for payment.

Now indeed was I utterly downcast: my position appeared positively appalling:—and stopping short in the middle of the road, I literally wrung

my hands in despair. But after a few moments' pause I continued to drag myself on again. In this manner I advanced about a mile along the road, without seeing another habitation. At length I observed what appeared to be a large barn, standing a little way back in a field. I at once repaired towards it, and to my joy found that one of the great folding-doors was partially open, emitting the fragrance of hay. I crept in, feeling my way very cautiously—for it was as dark as pitch: but I soon found that I was treading on a soft substance—and stooping down, I felt it. It was, as I had anticipated, hay scattered about. Then I stood still and listened, lest I might be intruding in a place where there were other occupants: but all was still. So I lay down, thanking heaven for thus at last guiding me to a place of refuge—and soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE VILLAGE.

When I awoke I heard voices talking: but it was still pitch dark—and several instants elapsed ere I could so far collect my ideas as to remember where I was. But when all the circumstances of my position came back to my mind, a mortal terror stole upon me as I felt that I was an intruder in some place where it was possible I might meet with ill-treatment. I lay as still as death—for the voices went on talking; and the instant I comprehended the subject of the discourse which I thus overheard in the dark, it assumed such a fearful interest as to engross all my faculties. The voices were those of men evidently in a very low condition of life: and I speedily discovered that they were three in number.

"And so you knowed the prisoner, did yer?" asked one.

"To be sure I did," was the response. "I seed him often enow when I worked up yonder last harvest-time. But I never should have thought he wor a chap as would have done this ere job."

"But be it werry sure that it wor him arter all?" inquired the third individual.

"Vy, the crowner's quest brought in a werdick of wilful murder agin him, and so I 'spose it wor all right enow. The crowner is a leary chap, and not likely to get the wrong pig by the ear."

"How wor it done?"

"Oh! with a sharp knife, or summut of that ere kind, I heerd say. The poor devil wor sticked right through the heart, and seemed all a gore of blood. That wor the pickle they found him in. It's made what they calls a sensation all in them parts."

"I des say," observed one of the questioners; "like enow. So I 'spose there'll be a bit of hanging done when the trial's over?"

"Aye, that there will," responded the informant. "It's a good bit o' time since there wor any hanging down in yon parts: and that wor a chap as murdered his sweetheart. But I say, mates, don't yer think it's time for us to be jogging? We have had a pretty good spell o' sleep since nine o'clock last night, and this is a cosy barn, where we've been warm and snug enow."

"Aye, let's be off," said another. "I can tell by what my feelings is that I've had plenty o' sleep; and though it's as dark as a coal-pit I'm pretty sure it's getting latish in the morning."

"Lor bless yer, I can tell as well as possible," said the third, "that it's just upon six o'clock—cos why, we have been awake about half-an-hour, and I always awakes regular at half-past five, no matter where I sleeps. So let's be trudging."

I heard the three men rise up from the spot where they had been sleeping at the farther extremity of the barn; and infinite was my relief when they issued forth without discovering me. A cold perspiration had started out from every pore as I gleaned the dim outline of the fearful topic of their discourse: for it was horrible indeed, in the darkness of that place and in the unprotected loneliness of my position, to hear *murder* thus spoken of. But when once the men were gone I took courage. Not that they, poor creatures! were likely to have done me any harm, even if they had discovered me; for judging by their discourse, they were trampers in search of work, and whom dire poverty had constrained to seek a resting-place in the same barn that afforded me an asylum. But still, as I have above said, it was a relief to find myself rid of such companionship; and I endeavoured to compose myself to sleep once more.

But though slumber did again revisit my eyes, it was feverish and unrefreshing. The pangs of hunger tormented me even in that sleep: I felt a horrible gnawing at the stomach;—and at the same time Murder, personified in the phantom-shape of a hideous night-hag, seemed to sit upon my breast. Two or three times I awoke in affright and even screamed out: but so great was the exhaustion I experienced, and such was my fear of venturing out into the dangers of darkness, that I on each occasion composed myself to sleep again. Thus in restless, fitful slumbers did I pass away the time until it was broad daylight.

I now arose from my hay-couch and issued forth from the barn. The weather was still beautiful, but frosty and cold as during the few previous days. Half famished as I was, I felt the nipping air bitterly; and wretched indeed were my sensations altogether as I continued my way. At the end of the lane there was a finger post marking the directions of two places: but their names being utterly unknown to me, afforded no indication of where I was. I looked around and beheld two or three country-seats and a few smaller habitations dotting the circumjacent landscape at considerable intervals of distance: but I resolved to pursue the road, as it must lead me sooner or later to one of the places indicated by the finger-post.

Having walked for about a couple of miles without observing a single habitation by the road-side where I might stop and test the hospitality of the inmates, I perceived a village at the bottom of a gentle hill which I was now descending. The sight cheered me: I felt assured that there must be some one there who would give me a mouthful of bread. I quickened my pace, and in a quarter of an hour entered the village, which was of very poor appearance, the largest house in the place being near the church—and therefore, as I concluded, the residence of the clergyman. In a very short time I perceived a small chandlery-shop, where bread was displayed in the window amongst

a miscellaneous assortment of goods—such as bottles of blacking, pieces of cheese, matches, candles, balls of twine, red herrings, bladders of lard, pieces of bacon, sugar, &c. I paused at the little window and looked wistfully through the dingy panes to see what sort of a person it was serving behind the counter. A middle-aged woman, with not a very inviting aspect, thus met my eyes—and my heart sank within me; for she assuredly was not one of those beings whose appearance could give any encouragement to a person in my forlorn and indeed mendicant position. But the sight of the bread sharpened the pangs of hunger to a degree that was intolerable; and mustering up all my courage I entered the shop. The woman stared at me with all her eyes, as the common phrase is: for in that retired out-of-the-way place it was evident she was unaccustomed to behold strange faces. I felt abashed—wished myself fairly out of the shop—and could not immediately speak. At length, as if suddenly recollecting that she was regarding me rudely, the woman put on a civil aspect, and said, "Well, Miss, what can I serve you with?"

"Will you hear me for a moment?" I asked in an appealing tone. "I have had the misfortune to leave my purse behind me, and I am famishing for want——"

"Then you have run away from home, I suppose?" exclaimed the woman, her manner changing all in a moment: and she eyed me with mingled impudence and suspicion.

"I have escaped from the hands of individuals who were my bitterest persecutors," was my answer. "I walked a considerable portion of the night and slept in a barn——"

"Oh! it's all very well," interrupted the woman sharply; "but if you have no money you can have nothing here:"—and locking up her little till, she placed her hands upon the counter as if she actually thought that I might make an attempt to rob her.

"All I ask is a piece of bread," said I, the tears trickling down my cheeks, and a deep sob almost choking my utterance. "If you will trust me a few pence only—even a single penny—the price of a roll—I will send you silver instead, the moment I get amongst friends again."

"There's enough of it," interrupted the woman: "I never give trust."

Feeling no longer hungry, but crushed down by the bitterest sense of humiliation I turned away and issued slowly from the shop. Slowly too did I pass on through the village. There was not another shop where bread was sold: nor of the several countenances which peeped forth from windows or doors to look at me as I passed—for I was stared at with a sort of vacant curiosity—was there one that gave me encouragement enough to stop and ask for a morsel of bread or a cup of milk. I felt as if my heart were breaking. What on earth would become of me?

Such was the question I put to myself as I reached the extremity of the hamlet. A lane led down to the churchyard; and I bethought me of applying to the clergyman and making my case known. Surely I should experience no rebuff there? I accordingly passed down the lane and entered the churchyard. Oh! I almost wished that I was one of the shrouded slumberers who slept the silent sleep of death in their narrow beds beneath those mounds which marked their graves: But the thought sent an icier chill to my heart; and shuddering all over, I quickened my pace to fly away as it were from that idea. Having traversed the churchyard and passed by the little temple of worship itself, with its sombre walls of rough stone and its ivy-covered tower, I reached the door of the house which I presumed to be the clergyman's residence. Timid was the knock which I gave: but my heart expanded somewhat when the summons was answered by a good-natured matronly woman, whom I immediately set down as the minister's housekeeper.

"Is this the clergyman's abode, if you please?" I asked in a tremulous voice.

"Yes, Miss," was the reply: and the dame surveyed me with increasing attention and curiosity.

"Could I be allowed to speak to him?" was my next question.

But before it was answered a door opened in the neat little hall, and an elderly gentleman, dressed in black, and who was evidently the clergyman himself, came forth. He had a somewhat severe look—sharp angular features—a pale face—and a cold grey eye. Again my heart sank within me, for I beheld nothing encouraging there!

"What is it, young woman?" he asked: for though his housekeeper had called me *Miss*, yet he himself, observing my timid trembling manner, doubtless suspected that I had no right to be saluted as a lady.

"I have taken the liberty to call and beseech some food," was my answer to his question: "for I am famishing!"—and I burst into tears.

"This is extraordinary—scarcely credible!" said the clergyman, his severe looks becoming full of suspicion. "Before I can give you any succour, you must convince me that you are not an impostress."

"Oh, sir!" I exclaimed in an appealing tone, "I can take heaven to witness that I have never done a deed nor harboured a thought of which I am ashamed!"

The old housekeeper looked in a compassionating manner, and the clergyman seemed somewhat to be touched: but still eyeing me with an earnest scrutiny, he asked, "How is it possible that a young woman of your respectable appearance can be in such a state? I cannot understand it—and you must explain: for I have enough to do for the poor of my own parish—and they *are* poor indeed—without incurring the chance of giving to strangers who may be undeserving of my assistance."

"Reverend sir," I answered, wiping away my tears and speaking in a firmer tone than at first, "I have been compelled to escape from the persecutions of one who has harboured the worst intentions towards me——"

"And who is that person to whom you allude?" inquired the clergyman.

"He is a gentleman of rank and fortune," was my response, "and in every way should have known much better. His name is Sir Aubrey Clavering."

"Eh—what—Clavering!" ejaculated a voice from inside the parlour, the door of which had remained open: and that voice at once sounded familiar to my ears. The next instant the speaker

came forth hurriedly into the hall—and I at once recognized Dr. Vincent. "Ah, Mary Price!" he exclaimed.

"Do you know her, then?" asked the village clergyman.

"Know her, my dear Palmer!" echoed Dr. Vincent. "Of course I do. She was in Lord Harlesdon's service; and she ran away a fortnight or three weeks back. She is the mistress of that very Clavering whom she has named. Lord and Lady Harlesdon saw her in his arms in a most shameless manner. His lordship told me so yesterday in Lady Harlesdon's presence."

I felt such a sudden faintness come over me as this terrible accusation met my ears, that I could not immediately give utterance to a word—much less proclaim an indignant denial; and my manner was no doubt but too well calculated to confirm in the opinion of Mr. Palmer and his housekeeper the statement made by Dr. Vincent.

"Then, after all, she is a wicked impostress?" said the village clergyman in a cold stern voice.

"Ah! the deceitful hussy!" cried the housekeeper with a toss of her head: "and I took her for a lady and called her *Miss!*"

"Hear me, I beseech you!" was now my agonizing prayer. "I am innocent—I am starving——"

But the door was slammed in my face; and almost blinded by the tears that gushed forth in a torrent from my eyes, I slowly dragged myself away into the churchyard again. There, when an angle of the sacred edifice screened me from the view of the parsonage-windows, I sat down upon a flat tombstone and gave unrestrained vent to the wild bitterness of my grief. And now as I looked once more upon the graves around me, I *did* wish that death would come to relieve me of all my troubles, and consign me to those deep wormy solitudes where the harsh stern voice of the cruel world is heard not, and whither the breath of calumny cannot penetrate to rend the heart or call up a blush to the cheek!

While thus plunged in my wretched meditations, I heard the rustling of a silk dress, and looking up, beheld an old lady advancing towards me. She was nicely dressed—had a very benevolent look—and was surveying me with much sympathising attention.

"Poor girl!" she said. "I presume you have some dear relative buried within these precincts?"

"No, ma'am," I answered: "I never was here before in my life. But I am very, very miserable—houseless—friendless—penniless—starving—— and yet through no fault of mine, I solemnly declare!"

The worthy lady looked at me very hard for nearly a minute: but her looks displayed a deepening sympathy and not a gathering suspicion. The tears were pouring down my cheeks, and my heart was convulsed with sobs. Heaven knows there was not any affectation in that grief so exquisite, so intense: and the lady was deeply moved as she thus surveyed me.

"Come with me," she said, taking my hand; and her voice trembled as she spoke. "I will give you what you require first, and you shall tell me your history afterwards. Come, my dear girl."

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the sudden revulsion of feeling which took place within me: it was as if some blessed balm from paradise itself had been poured down into the gaping wounds of my lacerated heart, mitigating in a moment all the intensity of their anguish, if not healing them completely. I endeavoured to murmur a few syllables of gratitude, but could not: my voice was choked with emotions of an ineffable nature;—and rising from my seat on the cold gravestone, I accompanied my benefactress from the churchyard. She led me to a neat little cottage surrounded by a perfect shrubbery of evergreens, and situated at a short distance from the hamlet's extremity. A young country-looking servant-girl, with cheeks as red as cherries and good-humour dancing in her blue eyes like sunlight in the depths of a lake, opened the door; and the old lady immediately said, "Bring in the breakfast things again, Lucy—make some fresh tea—boil a couple of eggs—and be quick."

"Yes, ma'am," responded the girl: and away she tripped to the back part of the house, while the old lady conducted me into a neat little parlour, where everything was in the most exquisite order, bespeaking that neatness, cleanliness, and comfort which were consistent with the taste of a gentlewoman. A large bible lay open upon a side-table; two or three portraits of ancient-looking personages were suspended to the walls; and some curious china-ornaments were ranged upon the mantel.

The lady made me sit down close by the cheerful fire; and with her own hands she helped to take off my bonnet and cloak. She looked kindly upon me, said some cheering words, and patted my face—but asked me no questions. Doubtless she thought it more consistent with a truly charitable hospitality to suffer me to recruit my strength with warmth and food first, ere I was required to enter upon any explanations. The active, bustling Lucy soon made her appearance with the breakfast-things; and I partook with avidity of some tea and dry toast. I tried to eat an egg—but my heart heaved against it. I had gone so long without food that my stomach was delicate to a degree: but I felt considerably refreshed by what I was enabled to eat and drink.

"I cannot express, ma'am," I said, when the repast was over, "the immensity of the gratitude I feel for your kindness. Without your benevolent aid I should have perished. I have not slept in a bed all night, but passed a few hours in a barn——"

"Good heavens, poor child!" exclaimed my benefactress, again deeply moved: for I had stopped suddenly short and burst into tears. "You shall go to bed at once if you like."

"No, ma'am, I thank you," was my answer; "I feel no inclination to sleep:"—then after a little hesitation, for I was fearful of giving trouble—poverty and destitution being the parents of timidity and diffidence—I said, "But if you would permit me to retire to a chamber for a few minutes——"

"To be sure, poor girl!" cried my benefactress: then summoning Lucy, she bade her show me upstairs and take up a pitcher of hot water.

I was accordingly conducted to a neat little bed-room, where the good-hearted Lucy indicated all the requisites for the toilet. She even, with a delicate thoughtfulness rarely to be met with in unpolished country-girls, took out a new tooth-

brush from a cupboard, and placed it on the toilet-table, – saying with a good-humoured smile, "You have such pretty teeth, Miss, that I am sure you must like to take great care of them."

That smile which she gave showed that *she* also possessed a brilliant set of teeth; which circumstance it was, no doubt, that made her so considerate on my account. I thanked her warmly for her kind attentions: and she left me, without lingering or loitering to lead me into a conversation that might gratify any curiosity which she must naturally have experienced concerning me.

The reader may well imagine how refreshing it was to be enabled to perform the duties of the toilet after the wretched night I had passed; and when I descended again to the little parlour, the good old lady took me by the hand, saying, "You are far too interesting a young creature to be tossed amidst the troubles and turmoils of the world. Sit down—and when you feel quite strong enough and quite disposed for conversation, you shall tell me what mischance has placed you in such a position."

I was about to commence my history, when a knock was heard at the front door. The summons was immediately answered by Lucy; and the visitor asked "whether Mrs. Hilton was at home?" But that voice—Oh! it sounded like the knell of death upon my ears; and I fell back ghastly and trembling in my chair.

"Heavens! what is the matter?" inquired the old lady, starting up and approaching me in dismay.

But ere I had time to answer the question, the parlour-door opened and Dr. Vincent (whose voice I had too well recognized) made his appearance.

"Good morning, my dear madam," he began—— "But hey-day!" he suddenly ejaculated on catching sight of me; "what is this girl doing here?"

Seized with a maddening sensation, I sprang up,

and clasping my hands with imploring manner, cried in a tone that was so piercing as even to ring through my own brain, "For heaven's sake, Dr. Vincent, do not—Oh! do not, I beseech you—repeat the odious calumny which you have uttered elsewhere!—do not deprive me of the sympathy of this good kind lady who has saved me from perishing with want and cold!"

"Young woman," said Dr. Vincent, drawing himself up pompously and speaking with a stern voice, "I cannot allow charity to be imposed upon or kindness to be outraged——"

"But hear me, hear me!" I screamed forth, almost frenzied with utter despair: then turning quickly round towards Mrs. Hilton, who was looking on in speechless amazement, I exclaimed, "Madam, judge me not harshly—condemn me not unheard, I implore and beseech you!"

"Dr. Vincent, pray explain the meaning of all this," said my benefactress, her look now becoming grave and mournfully suspicious.

"It is my duty—I will even say my painful duty," returned the rector, in a tone the severity of which belied his assurance of painful feeling, "to inform you, my dear Mrs. Hilton, that this young woman, whose name is Mary Price, absconded from Harlesdon Park where she was in service, and became the mistress of a certain Sir Aubrey Clavering——"

"It is false—utterly, totally false!" I exclaimed, indignation now somewhat triumphing over my previous sense of wretchedness. "I was carried forcibly away—I have been bitterly, bitterly persecuted by Sir Aubrey Clavering——"

"Young woman," interrupted Dr. Vincent, with a sternness that appeared to crush me beneath the weight of its terrible heartlessness,—"add not the crime of deliberate, wilful, unblushing falsehood to the catalogue of your ingratitudes, duplicities, and frailties."

"O heaven!" I exclaimed, wringing my hands bitterly, "may I not be heard? shall I not be suffered to explain?"

"Yes—let her defend herself," said Mrs. Hilton, her look showing that she was scarcely able to believe that my anguish was naught but a vile hypocrisy.

"No explanation is necessary," Dr. Vincent hastened to rejoin with an implacability that even now as I write makes my blood run cold when I think of it as associated with his calling as a minister of the gospel. "This young woman," he continued, addressing himself to Mrs. Hilton, "was seen by both Lord and Lady Harlesdon actually clasped in the arms of her paramour Sir Aubrey Clavering——"

"No, no!" I shrieked out hysterically: "it was all an infamous conspiracy—a vile trick—a terrible, terrible fraud! A woman, disguised in male attire so as to personate Sir Aubrey Clavering——"

"Silence, wicked and deceitful girl!" exclaimed Dr. Vincent: "this is too ridiculous, too absurd! Benevolent and full of confidence as Mrs. Hilton is, she cannot be deluded by such a wretched invention! Alas, my dear ma'am," he continued, addressing the old lady, "I fear that this is one of those cases whose history is summed up in a very few words—seduction and abandonment by the seducer!"

"If you possess a daughter, Dr. Vincent, of whose innocence you are assured, she is not more innocent than I!"—and as I thus spoke I felt that indignation was colouring my cheeks and flashing from my eyes.

"You see, my worthy friend," said the cruel clergyman, shaking his head in that ominously knowing manner which is ten thousand times more powerful than words to throw distrust upon even an angel's purity itself; "this is a confirmed case of profoundest hypocrisy and brazen impudence."

"I can no longer doubt it," answered Mrs. Hilton, now very grave, very serious, and also severe. "Young woman, I do not regret having given you food—for you evidently wanted it; and whatever your offences have been, you cannot be allowed to starve in a Christian country. But you must now take your departure; and may God fill your soul with penitence for your wickedness! It is really distressing to think that so young and innocent-looking a creature should possess so bad a heart."

"Oh, my kind benefactress!" I exclaimed, falling upon my knees at her feet, "I do not ask you to extend your bounty any farther towards me: but for heaven's sake do not force me to go away until I have proved that you have not harboured a worthless and undeserving girl!"

"Rise, young woman," said Mrs. Hilton, drawing back as I attempted to take her hand; "and let this painful scene have an ending at once."

I did rise as she bade me: but speeding to the table on which the open bible lay, I placed my hand upon the book, exclaiming, "As sincerely and solemnly as I believe in the contents of this sacred volume, do I proclaim my innocence!"—then overcome by grief, I sank upon a chair and burst forth into a fresh flood of tears, clasping my hands convulsively.

But no soothing nor encouraging word fell from Mrs. Hilton's lips. She remained silent: and when I looked up towards her through the dimness of my tears, I observed that her eyes were fixed upon me with grave mournfulness.

"Will you not—O! will you not, for the last time," I exclaimed, "hear me in my defence? I can explain everything——"

"It is useless to let her go on like this," said Dr. Vincent. "Both Lord and Lady Harlesdon are positive as to the facts. Say no more therefore, Mary Price," he added, turning to me; "but depart at once."

"God will yet, in his own good time, make my innocence apparent!" said I, rising slowly from the chair: "and now in God is my only trust!"

I put on my bonnet and cloak; and as I turned to leave the room, I said, "Mrs. Hilton,—for I have learnt your name, and notwithstanding all that now occurs, it will ever be cherished with the deepest gratitude in my memory,—accept my fervent thanks for what you have done. Some day perhaps——"

I could say no more—my voice was choked with the sobs that suddenly convulsed me; and I was opening the door to depart, when Mrs. Hilton sprang forward and caught me by the arm, saying in a hurried voice which was tremulous with emotion, "I do not believe you—I cannot believe you in defiance of all I have heard! But I will not suffer you to depart penniless. Here is a little silver——"

"No!" I exclaimed: "if you think me guilty, I

can receive no more bounties from your hand. But depend upon it the day must come when you will regret having thus misjudged me:"—and I hurried from the room. I do believe that Mrs. Hilton, probably staggered by my manner, was still inclined to rush after me—for it seemed that my ear caught a movement indicative of such an attempt on her part: but most probably Dr. Vincent held her back; for I heard him say in a quick voice, "Let her go, let her go!"

The next instant I was outside the front-door of the cottage—once more a friendless, houseless, penniless wanderer on the face of the earth. I did not look back at the little dwelling which for an hour had afforded me an asylum: I had not courage to revert my glance upon the comfortable abode where no doubt I could have remained longer had it not been for the appearance of Dr. Vincent.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RENEWED WANDERINGS.

SLOWLY, and with thoughts of the most mournful contexture, did I proceed along the road leading away from the village. What course was I to adopt? what would become of me? Again was I asking myself these terrible questions which I had so often uttered in my heart's deep despondency previously to falling in with Mrs. Hilton. Suddenly an idea flashed to my mind, prompting me how to act in accordance with the duty which I owed to myself and to others. I would proceed as direct as circumstances might permit to Harlesdon Park! That it could not be very far distant I felt assured for several reasons. In the first place the White Cottage itself could not have been more at the outside than twelve or fifteen miles away from the Park, because the post-chaise that had borne me thither on the night I was carried off, did not change horses. Moreover, Lord and Lady Harlesdon were riding in their own barouche, drawn by their own horses, and not in a travelling-carriage nor with posters, when they had met me in company with the Gipsy Queen. Then again, Dr. Vincent had mentioned that he had seen Lord and Lady Harlesdon on the preceding day; and therefore the village where I had just so unfortunately encountered him, could not be at any extraordinary distance.

At all events my mind was made up to repair to the Park, seek an interview with her ladyship, and inform her of everything that had happened to me. I therefore resolved to make inquiries, relative to the whereabouts of the Park, of the very first person I should meet: but I walked very slowly, fearful lest I might be travelling away from that point which was now my fixed destination.

Perhaps some of my readers may be curious to know whether amidst the turmoil and agitation of my thoughts, from the moment of my escape from the White Cottage, the image of Eustace Quentin had risen up in my mind. But, ah! those who have truly and fondly loved, will scarcely ask such a question: for they must know that this image could scarcely have ever been absent from my thoughts, but that it was mixed up with them ever and inseparably, like a permeating essence or an all-pervasive principle. And Oh! a thousand, thousand times had I felt myself shuddering, down to the very depths of my being, at the bare idea that the horrible calumny relative to Sir Aubrey Clavering might reach the ears of Eustace before I could give it an indignant refutation, and prove its falsity to those whose lips or whose pens might convey the foul aspersion to his knowledge. I of course knew that Lady Harlesdon, devotedly attached as she had been, and perhaps still was, to Clavering, would regard me as the most deceitful and ungrateful of human beings, apart from the shocking immorality of my supposed connexion with the Baronet. She, then, would not fail to mention to her cousin Eustace all that she had been led to believe concerning me; and thus in every way and for a thousand reasons, did it become my paramount duty to drag myself, no matter amidst what wearinesses, fatigues, and privations, to Harlesdon Park, in order at once to set myself right with her ladyship.

While I was thus giving way to my reflections, I heard the sounds of wheels approaching; and presently perceived an old couple looking like a small farmer and his wife, jogging along in a spring-cart. They were advancing so slowly that I had ample opportunity to survey their countenances ere I ventured to stop them; and observing that they seemed very good-tempered—the old man, especially, having a blithe jovial air—I made a sign to indicate I wished to speak to them. The horse was at once pulled in—the cart stopped—and the old couple prepared to listen in a respectful manner, for they evidently took me for a lady.

"Can you tell me, if you please," I inquired, "how far I am from Harlesdon Park?"

"Oh, aye," exclaimed the old man: "I know it well enow. It be a good eighteen mile from here."

"Thank you," I answered. "But in which direction?"

"Straight for'ard the way you are going," was the response. "You can't miss it if you keep asking the way every now and then. But surely you don't mean to walk all that there distance?"

"Yes—I must walk," I replied quickly: then anxious to escape any questioning from those whom I myself had stopped to interrogate, I again thanked them for their kindness and hurried along.

But eighteen miles! it was a great distance after all. Could I possibly achieve it during that day? I feared not—even if I were sure of obtaining refreshments on the road. But of this there was no certainty: for, as the reader is aware, I was penniless, and the rebuffs I had already experienced made me recoil with loathing from the idea of having to ask charity again. Nevertheless, I did all I could to keep my spirits from giving way entirely. Indeed, I strove to buoy myself up with hope as much as possible.

"How pleasant it will be," I said to myself, "to be restored to Lady Harlesdon's confidence—to wipe away the dreadful impression that has been made upon her mind—and to enter again on the performance of my duties in her service. Oh! how I long to kiss dear little Bella, and listen again to the artless prattle of the two boys! And what a change, to sit once more by the cheerful nursery-fire, taking my tea with Jemima, after all the

dreadful privations I have endured! Then too, I will write to Mrs. Hilton—explain in a letter what I had no opportunity just now of telling in words—and while renewing my thanks for the hour's hospitality I received at her hands, convince her that after all I was not unworthy of it. Yes—and I will beseech her to call upon the village-clergyman, Mr. Palmer, and show him my letter, that he likewise may be disabused of his prejudice concerning me: for wherever the hideous calumny has been circulated, thither must the contradiction go."

Cheered by these reflections, I felt that they imparted energy to my frame as well as strength to my mind. As I walked on with a quicker pace, it suddenly struck me that I was unacquainted with the name of the village through which I had so recently passed, and where Mrs. Hilton resided. But was it not one of the places indicated by the finger-post, and which I did remember? Perhaps it was however better to make sure. A countryman, with a bundle slung upon a stick over his shoulder, was approaching at the moment. I stopped him, and asked the name of the village that lay behind and was still in sight. He told me: and I then perceived that it was, after all, one of the names I had seen upon the finger-post at an earlier hour in the morning. Thanking the rustic for his information, I continued my way: but he stopped and stared after me for two or three minutes, doubtless surprised to see a respectably dressed young person travelling alone on foot and evidently a total stranger in those parts.

I walked on, and in about an hour reached another village. Accosting a labourer whom I met on the outskirt, I inquired how far it was to Harlesden Park: but he said that he was quite strange in the neighbourhood, and had never heard of it Entering the village, I saw a woman standing at the door of a little shop with a child in her arms. She was evidently its mother, and I thought by the fond way she was talking to it, must be good-natured. I therefore accosted her, and repeated the question which I had put to the labourer,—my object being to assure myself that I was still in the right road.

"It's near upon sixteen mile to the Park, Miss," responded the woman; and though she spoke civilly, she nevertheless eyed me with mingled suspicion and surprise.

I thanked her and was turning away, when she said, "Perhaps you would like to sit down, Miss, and rest yourself: for, excuse me, but I don't think you are accustomed to travel a great distance on foot."

I cheerfully accepted her kind offer, and walked into the little shop. The stock in trade consisted of a few toys, half-a-dozen glass bottles containing sweetstuff, some nuts, and cakes of gingerbread—the whole of which might have been purchased for about ten shillings. A couple of little children were playing in the corner; and the woman placed the one she had in her arms down beside them, evidently that she might talk more at her ease with me. I now began to suspect it was rather to gratify her curiosity than through any really compassionate feeling that she had invited me to enter; and if I had not begun to feel wearied again and therefore coveted this rest, I should have got up and gone away.

"Have you been walking far to-day," she asked "that you seem tired?"

"Yes—a long distance," I responded.

"And where may you come from?"

"I am going to Harlesdon Park."

"Aye—so you said. Are you strange there? or have you been there afore?"

"I have been there before: I have lived there."

"Oh! then may be you can tell us all about that there sad job of which we've heerd summut?" said the woman, her eyes twinkling with an eager curiosity.

"To what do you allude?" I asked quickly, and with much amazement: for I could not possibly conjecture what it was that had reached the woman's ears, and I was at once struck with apprehension lest something had happened to my mistress.

"How? hav'n't you heerd of the murder, then?" she asked with a sort of mysterious surprise.

"The murder!" I repeated, horror-stricken. "Good heavens! what do you say? Speak—tell me?"

"Why, it was more than a fortnight—near three weeks ago," continued the woman, "that it happened."

"But where? who has been murdered?"

"I think he was the gamekeeper."

"Ah!" I ejaculated, a presentiment of the truth flashing to my mind. "But his name—his name?"

"Harper—Jacob Harper."

"Good heavens! and he is murdered?" I cried. "But who was the assassin? is he discovered?"

"Oh, ah—to be sure," rejoined the woman, "and will be tried in a few days at Derby, they say. The winter 'sizes is on——"

"But the murderer—who is he?"

"A man named Percival——"

"What? no! it is impossible!" I exclaimed, starting up from my seat in a positive frenzy of excitement, which caused the woman to fall back in dismay. "But his other name? his Christian name? Speak! quick—quick!"

"Oh! it's well knowed," she answered: "Leonard—that's the name."

I sank down again in the chair as if struck upon the forehead by the hand of an invisible giant. The blended bewilderment and stupor of a horrible consternation seized upon me; and my sensations were as if some tremendous calamity had occurred to myself. But as the first astounding effect of this intelligence began to subside, the conversation I had overheard amongst the trampers in the barn came back to my memory; and I now recognised what was the topic of their discourse which had inspired me with so appalling an interest at the time. Raising my eyes towards the woman, I saw that she was regarding me in a strange manner—perhaps with something of suspicion in her looks: and indeed the excitement I had shown on receiving the terrible announcement, was full well calculated to amaze and puzzle, if not actually alarm her.

"You say that you have lived at Harlesdon Park—that you are going there now," she observed, still fixing her keen eyes upon me; "and yet you hav'n't heerd of this sad job—leastways not until I told you?"

"I had not indeed heard of it," was my answer; "or you would not have seen me so calm as I was at the moment when I entered your house."

"Then mayhap Jacob Harper, the man what's dead, is a relation of your'n?"

"No, no—nothing of the kind. But I know Leonard Percival, and cannot bring myself to believe him guilty of this dreadful act. Yet if," I continued, musing aloud, "he has indeed been provoked to so terrible a retaliation, by some deeper outrage than he had previously experienced, he will perish ignominiously; and then what will become of his Ellen—what will become of her?"—and I wrung my hands in despair at the thought.

"May-be you are his Ellen, then?" said the woman, in a half-commiserating tone.

"No, no—I am not: but I know her well."

"When I come to think on't, you can't be arter all," continued the woman: "for I heerd say that he was running off with some young gal of the neighbourhood and her old grandmother, when he was caught with all the money upon him——"

"What money?" I demanded quickly.

"Why, what he robbed the gamekeeper of, to be sure," was the response. "It was knowed that the murdered man had a hundred pounds about him at the time——"

"Yes—a hundred pounds," I repeated mechanically. "But pray give me some particulars—pray tell me all that you know—what you have heard upon the subject."

"On'y this," replied the woman, "that one evening, it seems, Leonard Percival the murderer——"

"Don't call him the murderer," I interrupted, with a strong shudder that must have been plainly visible. "Every one is to be held innocent till proved guilty. But go on—pray go on."

"Well," continued the woman, "as I was saying, it was one evening, three or four days afore Christmas, this Leonard Percival was had up charged with poaching, and committed for some weeks. You see this took place at Harlesdon Park, and Percival was locked up in a stable till morning. Of course you know the stable, since you have lived at the Park? Well, he got out somehow or another—cut and run. Next morning the gamekeeper, wot had appeared against him, was found murdered in a field near the Park. He had been stabbed with a knife and robbed of everything he had about him. There was a hue and cry: and this Percival was taken, along with two women—his gal and her grandmother—at some place about twenty mile off. He had a hundred pound in his pocket; and his clothes was stained with blood. When took afore the magistrate, he was sent to prison, and the two women was let go, as it was proved that they hadn't nothing to do with the murder. Then there was a crowner's quest, which went against Leonard: and that's all I know."

"And you say that Percival has been sent to prison at Derby?" I asked, rising from my seat.

"Yes—that's just it."

"And the trial comes on in two or three days?"

"So we've heerd."

"How far is it from this place to Derby? Which is nearer, Harlesdon Park or Derby?"

"Both pretty well alike. The Park is about sixteen mile over that way; and Derby a matter of seventeen mile over that way."

"Thank you," was my response; and I was hurrying away when the woman begged me to stop a little longer, as she had doubtless her own curiosity to gratify concerning me. I however refused, and sped from the little shop, all my thoughts so completely absorbed in the frightful intelligence I had just received that I had no room to reflect upon, much less to care for, the impression that my somewhat extraordinary conduct might have made upon the woman.

As I rapidly passed through the village I deliberated with myself whether I should, on gaining the outskirt, continue the road leading to Harlesdon Park, or take that which led to Derby. I experienced a feverish, burning haste to see Leonard: for during the woman's recital of the circumstances of the case many important things had recurred to my memory, and which it was absolutely necessary should be made known to the prisoner as speedily as possible. My anxiety to clear up my character with Lady Harlesdon, from having half-an-hour back been uppermost in my mind, had now become quite a secondary consideration after all that I had heard relative to Percival. My determination as to the route to be pursued, was therefore soon taken; and on reaching the point where the two roads branched off, I left that to Harlesdon Park on my right and took the one which a finger post indicated as leading to Derby.

But now, the reader will ask, was not Eustace Quentin with his regiment at Derby? and was I not proceeding, therefore, to the very spot where I stood a chance of encountering him, in violation of my resolve to avoid such meeting for a whole year? Yes—this is true enough: though whether Eustace was still at Derby, or elsewhere, I knew not. But the reader will believe me when I solemnly declare that no such selfish hope nor aim for an instant—no, not even for a single instant—swayed my decision in taking the road to Derby. God forbid! It was a sacred duty which I was now performing——the reader may guess *how sacred*, when even the anxiety to see Lady Harlesdon and clear up my character had become a secondary consideration to that which was now urging me on towards Derby.

For about three hours I continued walking without any very painful sense of fatigue: the activity of my thoughts seemed to impart some of their exciting spirit to my frame, at the same time that their subject was so all-engrossing as to shut out as it were the consciousness that I was becoming wearied. It was now past two o'clock in the afternoon, and the gnawings of hunger began to make themselves felt along with the influence of weariness. During the last three hours I had only managed to walk eight miles: it therefore still wanted nine to be completed ere I should enter Derby. Beholding a pretty little cottage at a short distance along the road, I quickened my pace to reach it,—determined to knock at the door and request a morsel of food. The idea of begging—for such it really was—shocked me to the very innermost depths of my soul, especially after the rebuffs I had already experienced. But I was ruled by an imperious necessity: nine miles of travel lay before me, and without some nourishment I could not hope to accomplish that distance during the present day;—and to risk the chance of wandering about for another night in the open country, without perhaps the good fortune of finding a friendly barn as on the preceding night,

the bare thought filled me with ineffable horror! It likewise inspired me with the requisite courage to knock at the door of the pretty little cottage which I have mentioned; and my summons was immediately answered by a great stout man with a very ferocious countenance, and who was smoking a pipe.

I had pictured to myself some quiet charitable family dwelling in that retirement, which was pretty and even picturesque, though in the depth of winter: so that I was completely staggered at this sudden dispelling of all my poetic dreams by the apparition of such an uncouth forbidding personage.

"Well, young 'ooman, what is it?" he demanded in a great rough voice. "Come, can't you speak? Who be you? Your face is strange in these parts."

"I have walked a considerable distance to-day," was my answer, given tremulously and with downcast looks; "and I am very hungry. Having left my purse behind me where I come from——"

"Oh, my eye, what a lark!" shouted the man with a coarse guffaw. "Why, what o'clock do you get up in the morning, that you think you can take in a leary cove like me with such a precious stale dodge as that? I say, Harry, do come here a bit."

A faintness came over me, and I could not for the moment fly from the spot. My instincts prompted me to speed onward from the presence of insult; but my limbs had become heavy as lead—and all that sense of utter wretchedness which I had before experienced during my painful wanderings, came back with an overpowering effect. While I was thus rivetted to the spot, another man, whose thin and emaciated appearance was in striking contrast with that of his comrade who had called him forth, came out of the house to stare at me.

"Well, I never did see such a precious sanctimonious-looking beggar as this is," exclaimed the latter individual, who was also smoking a pipe. "I tell you what it is, Charley, she's on what's called the *genteel dodge*—togged out so as to look like a distressed young lady—a governess, or upper-class maid, or something of that sort. But let's ask her in to have a drop with us. She's uncommon pretty, 'pon my soul!"

"So we will," cried the stout man: and the two fellows rushed towards me.

Galvanized with the suddenness of frenzied terror, I fled precipitately. The two men pursued me along the road; but the stout one very speedily abandoned the chase, which his emaciated companion however maintained for several minutes. The wildness of my affright lent wings to my feet: and I felt that I was literally flying over the ground. At length the glance which I flung over my shoulder, gave me the pleasing assurance that the pursuit was now renounced altogether; and overcome with exhaustion, I sank down upon a bank by the side of the road. There I gave vent to my feelings in tears—Oh! how many, many tears had I shed since my flight from the White Cottage!

It was nearly half-an-hour before I could regain either strength or spirits sufficient to enable me to pursue my journey; and even then I did so with a weary foot and a heavy heart. Good heaven! what rebuffs, what terrors, what false accusations, what intervals of excitement, and what insults, had I undergone from the time of my escape on the previous night down to the present moment! Was it not enough to dishearten me thoroughly—to prostrate me altogether? was it not even sufficient to make me lie down and welcome the approach of death, no matter if it came in the shape of starvation alike with cold and hunger? But no: I had still something—aye, much to live for: I had to reach Derby for one thing, and then to clear up my character for another—and these must be accomplished! Therefore did I struggle against despair, battle against hopelessness, and strive to compel my limbs to bear me onward, and my feelings to become as callous as possible to the cravings of hunger.

The days are short in the middle of January; and soon after three o'clock darkness begins to draw its veil upon the earth. The gloom was gathering around me, and the chill became more intense. As the obscurity deepened, I began to fear lest I should miss the road, or that it might haply become too dark for me to proceed with safety. Then what would become of me? It was impossible to pass the night in the open air: I should inevitably perish with cold. Oh! if on reaching the next hamlet or village, I were to call upon the clergyman and explain to him on what sacred duty I was bound, would he not furnish me with the means to procure some vehicle, or pay my place by some coach to Derby? It was impossible he could refuse! And yet it seemed as if the tide of misfortune had set in so completely against me, that even if for a moment I found a friend, some accident would speedily intervene to alienate the good feeling and send me forth a wanderer again. But ah! while I was thus giving way to my reflections, I observed lights twinkling ahead—dimly seen through the gathering gloom; and I felt assured it must be some assemblage of habitations, and not merely one isolated dwelling. Onward I went as quickly as my limbs would carry me: the lights grew more numerous and more distinct—and in about a quarter of an hour I entered what appeared to be a long straggling village.

Almost at the very commencement of the single street which constituted the place, there was a tavern with the door standing open, and whence the light streamed forth; while through the window of a ground-floor room the blaze of a cheerful fire might be seen playing in its ruddy glow. I went up to the door and looked in. A man and a woman—evidently the landlord and landlady—were standing behind the bar; and they had both such a good-tempered look that I was almost at once prompted to enter and make known my wants—a little food and a vehicle to take me to Derby—for all of which I would faithfully remit them the money so soon as I could either communicate with Lady Harlesdon or return to her at the Park.

I did enter—and I did make known my wants in the precise terms which I had pre-arranged. I will not weary the reader's patience by detailing all the conversation that passed: suffice it to say I was listened to with attention by the landlord and with benevolent sympathy by the landlady. But they put a great many searching questions to me, alleging as their excuse that they were so liable to be imposed upon by designing persons. Nevertheless, their manner encouraged me; and as the conversation progressed, I felt hope gradually rising up within my breast. But still they did not seem fully and completely satisfied; and after whispering together, they looked very hard at me, and put farther questions. Where had I

come from? I said that I had been carried off and kept a prisoner under very peculiar circumstances, but that I really could not enter into full particulars. If they would trust to my word they would find that I not only spoke truly, but should know how to be grateful. This was all very well, they said; but why was I so anxious to see the person accused of murder—namely, Leonard Percival? I answered that I had matters of the greatest importance to mention to him, but which I could scarcely now explain without entering into a series of lengthy particulars. The landlord looked serious—the landlady was evidently inclined to believe me. She whispered a few words to her husband, the import of which I could guess: for I heard her say, "After all, who knows? it may be true. She does not look like a cheat. In any case let us risk it."

The good woman's advice accordingly prevailed; and to my ineffable joy I was invited into the bar-parlour, where there was a cheerful fire. Provisions were set before me, and the landlady pressed me to do justice to them—while her husband went to put the horse into the covered chaise-cart, as he himself would drive me over to Derby. Infinite was the relief which I thus experienced; and it seemed as if I had been suddenly elevated from the bottomless pit of despair to the shining regions of hope.

I had finished my meal and was answering some questions the landlady put to me concerning Harlesdon Park and the "great folks," as she called them, who dwelt there, when her husband returned into the parlour ready equipped for the journey. He had got on his great coat—a thick pair of gloves—a huge shawl neckcloth, coming up to his nose—and a very broad-brimmed hat; and he said the hostler was just bringing round the chaise-cart to the door. I was already in the middle of taking leave of the landlady, and was expressing my gratitude for the kindness shown me, when two persons on horseback galloped up to the door; and while one of them alighted, the other (who proved to be his servant) held the horses.

"Now, landlord!" exclaimed the individual, who, having sprung off his steed at the door, entered the tavern and hurried up to the bar; "a glass of hot brandy-and-water, and send out another to my groom."

"Yes, my lord," replied the master of the establishment. "Now, my dear," he cried, beckoning his wife to come forth from the parlour; "look sharp—brandy for Lord Miltown——Your lordship likes it strong, I believe?"

"You rogue, you," answered the nobleman, laughing, "you know I do! What a bitter chill! but as an old sportsman I do not hesitate to face it. Ah! holloa! who have you got there? I ought to know that face! Why, by Jupiter! it's Mary Price!"—and his lordship gave a sort of mocking ironical laugh.

At the very first moment I had recognized the nobleman: for I was standing in such a way, close by the threshold of the bar-parlour, that I could not help seeing any one who entered the establishment. An instantaneous misgiving had struck cold to my heart: but I did not dare step back and conceal myself, for that would at once have looked suspicious. When, however, he recognized me—although I averted my countenance as much as possible—I felt instinctively that all was over that again was my evil star dominant, and that all my new formed hopes were destined to destruction. My worst fear was confirmed by that cruel mocking laugh, which pierced like a barbed arrow through my very brain.

As a matter of course both the landlord and landlady turned their eyes upon me: for they were naturally at a loss to understand what to think from his lordship's conduct. But he very soon enlightened them.

"Yes—it is pretty Mary Price," he exclaimed, leaning over the bar and staring at me in the rudest possible manner—although, as an old man, he ought to have taken compassion upon a poor helpless young girl, even if he really believed (which he no doubt did at the time) the rumour that had reached his ears concerning me. "Why, you sly naughty puss, you! to have all along looked so demure, and then to have run off with Sir Aubrey Clavering at last!"

"My lord," I exclaimed, "it is a foul calumny! Do not, for heaven's sake, repeat it! You know not the incalculable mischief you will do me!"—and I spoke in the most earnestly appealing manner.

"Calumny!" he exclaimed. "What the deuce do you mean? At all events it is no calumny to say that you were seen in Clavering's arms: for both Lord and Lady Harlesdon told me so this very morning."

"It is false, my lord!" I cried vehemently: "and if you will permit me to explain——"

"It's all very well for you to tell me that I am uttering a falsehood, young woman," interrupted Lord Miltown sternly; "but——"

"I did not mean that your lordship told a falsehood," I hastened to observe; "but that the impression was false. Good heavens! is my character thus to be lightly tossed to the winds?"—and I wrung my hands bitterly.

"Well, at all events," added Lord Miltown, who had just finished his brandy-and-water, "you will find it rather difficult to make my friends, the Harlesdons, believe you innocent; and I don't think you will be in a great hurry to show your face again at the Park."

With these words his lordship flung down the money for the two glasses of liquor, a slipshod boy having taken one out to his groom; and wishing the landlord "Good evening," hurried out of the place. The next instant the two steeds were heard galloping away.

No words can express the miserable state of mind into which I was again plunged. For nearly a minute I stood what is called aghast—utterly bewildered what to say or do: for the frightful experiences of the morning had rendered me only too painfully aware that when charges are so boldly made, the defence of the accused avails nothing, even if it be listened to at all. Yet I felt that I must say something: for immediately after his lordship had hurried away, both the landlord and landlady began to assail me with the most cutting reproaches—even threatening to call the constable and give me into charge as an impostress. Never, never shall I forget the bitterness of that moment. The idea of a gaol well nigh drove me to frenzy. I threw myself upon my knees—extended my clasped

hands up towards the landlord and landlady—protested my innocence—and besought them to hear me. But good-natured as they had previously been, inexorable were they now. They thought they had been imposed upon by an impudent cheat; and the landlord felt assured that if it had not been for what he considered the fortunate visit of Lord Miltown, he should have been made a still greater fool of by driving me over to Derby. Such being his impression—and in which his wife shared—it is scarcely to be wondered at if they thrust me ignominiously, and even violently, forth from their estab'ishment.

And such they did. Reader, you have already seen that I had endured much—that I had suffered many, many miseries—much poignant cruelty and many bitter persecutions, since my escape from the White Cottage: but all that I had previously undergone was not to be compared with this. It seemed as if my heart were rent in twain; and dragging myself to a little distance from the tavern into some dark nook, whither the light from the windows could not penetrate, I leant against a wall and wept with an anguish such as, even if I were vindictive, I could not wish my most mortal enemy to know. It positively appeared as if God himself had deserted me. I cared not now what became of me. I was not actually desperate, because desperation prompts one to do something, no matter how perilous or terrible, in order to chance a change of position. But I had no energy left for anything: mine was an utter hopelessness even beyond despair, if the reader can understand what I mean. The only resource left was to lay me down and die!

But in a few minutes the sounds of men's voices, laughing rudely and coarsely, approached up the alley, or yard, whatever it was, where I was standing; and the fear of fresh insult made me turn away. Through the village I passed, slowly and wearily. The lights streamed from the windows—I caught glimpses of cheerful fires in comfortable rooms: I heard laughter—heard also mothers talking fondly to their children. But there was no cheerfulness now, no soothing voice for me: I felt an outcast—a mendicant—a beggar, in the wide world. Oh! the deep, deep humiliation, the goading anguish of such feelings as these! The scaffold has seen no agony, the churchyard has known no anguish, more terrible than what I then endured. The tears were raining down my cheeks as I dragged myself through the village: if I had felt the hand of death upon me, I should not have had the courage to knock at a single door or beseech succour of a single soul. It seemed as if my very faith in humanity was gone. On leaving the village behind and getting beyond the sphere of its twinkling lights, deep was the obscurity through which I walked on: but Oh! how transcendent far was the darkness that enveloped my soul!

Even as I write now, I drop bitter burning tears as I think of the miseries which I then endured, and glad should I be to hurry over these details and dispose of the incidents of many hours in a few brief lines, but that it is requisite to describe all that I suffered, so that my narrative may be faithful and complete. And, thank heaven! this sad chapter in my life is speedily drawing to a close.

Wretchedly did I drag myself along—proceeding mechanically as it were, rather than in consequence of a settled purpose. For my thoughts were gradually falling into confusion, while my limbs were simultaneously failing me. I remember saying to myself, "I shall not be able to go much further:" and yet I kept on, with the growing conviction however that I must very soon drop down, heaven only knew whether to rise up alive again! I likewise remember that as I thus persevered in walking onward, I frequently staggered and stumbled, so as to be very near falling, but that recovering my balance I went on again. Presently the sounds of wheels and horses' feet met my ears; and a coach, with its two bright lamps flinging a glare upon the four steaming animals, swept meteor-like by. It passed on into darkness, having illuminated my path for an instant—like the hope which ere now I had cherished and which had so suddenly flitted away.

On I went: but the reader must not fancy that I was proceeding quickly. No—it was with a slow and dying pace that I advanced, as if the infirmity of old age had seized upon my limbs. My shoes were worn completely through—my feet were cut—and I had an idea that they were bleeding. But I had not heart or scarcely sense enough left to think much of the matter: and still I dragged myself onward, like a jaded steed that has just sufficient mettle left to pursue its course until the end, instinctively aware that to halt is to drop down and die.

Presently, as my thoughts became more and more confused, I fancied that strange sounds were ringing in my ears—strange voices talking near me—and strange footsteps keeping pace with my own. My name was mentioned, as if in the hollow tones of the grave. It even struck me that a hand was laid upon my shoulder—a hand that sent through my cloak an ice-chill penetrating all my flesh, bone, and marrow, and going deep down into my heart like the ice-chill of death. Of course all this was mere fancy on my part: my brain was beginning to wander. But the abrupt appearance of a light glimmering a-head, recalled me somewhat to myself; and then all those illusions quickly vanished. But what to me was that light? If it shone from a village, should I not avoid it?—if it gleamed forth from the window of an isolated house, should I dare pause and knock at the door? Had I not been taunted, rebuked, persecuted, and humbled enough already?—or did I seek farther humiliations? I know not. My thoughts, though somewhat more lucid than they were a few minutes back, were still too confused to permit me to develop my own intentions clearly to myself; and therefore I suppose that I instinctively regarded that light as the point which must mark the climax of my miseries—the spot which I must make a last effort to reach, but beyond which I could not go.

As I advanced, the dim outline of a mansion gradually stood out from the darkness; and the light grew stronger. A little nearer, and I perceived that the house was situated in the midst of a garden, with iron railings fencing it on the road-side. I reached the gate of those railings—I felt for the latch—but the gate would not open: it was evidently locked. Dared I give a servant the trouble to come forth and hear what I had to say? No: and I was proceeding onward, in the deepest, deepest despondency, when my foot tripped against a stone—and I fell. Consciousness did not immediately abandon me: for I remember that I endeavoured to raise

myself up again, but could not—then that I murmured lowly, "O God, I am dying!"—then that I instinctively grasped the bell-pull——and the next instant fell back senseless.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ANOTHER CHANGE IN MY POSITION.

When I awoke to consciousness again, I was lying in a bed in a well-furnished chamber, the features of which I could not altogether distinguish at first, because though it was broad daylight, the windows were darkened by the closely-drawn curtains. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate, by the side of which sat an old woman, whom by her appearance I guessed to be a nurse. Several bottles of medicine were standing upon the mantel; and the entire aspect of the place was that of a sick-room.

As my mental faculties thus slowly struggled into life again and gradually acquired the power of thought and reflection, I lay perfectly still, allowing each new impression to settle itself in my mind: for I was by no means certain but that I was still in the midst of a dream. So I fixed my eyes upon two or three objects in succession—such as the window-curtains, the fire, and the old woman who sat near it—in order to convince myself that I was really awake. Imperceptibly the knowledge grew on me that I must have been very ill; and my feelings gradually merged into a sensation of awe, as I reflected upon this circumstance and beheld one after another all the evidences of the sick-room in their complete reality, beyond the possibility of a dream. Suddenly an impulse was given to the springs of my memory; and all those

circumstances which have been detailed in the last few chapters, surged upwards with a tide that was well nigh overwhelming. What I had suffered at the White Cottage—my escape—the miseries I had gone through during my wretched wanderings—the tale I had heard relative to Leonard Percival—the object on which I was bound to Derby—and then the sudden blank which had occurred, from the moment of my fainting at the gate of a road-side mansion until I awoke again to life and found myself pillowed in that sick-bed,—this was the summary of my reviving recollections; and at the end of the rapid whirl of thoughts through my brain, I asked aloud in feverish anxiety, "Where am I? and how long have I been here?"

I say that I spoke aloud: I mean that I spoke audibly—for my voice had really no strength; and as the effort of speaking made me aware of its weakness, the circumstance carried a fresh conviction to my soul that I had been very, very ill.

"Poor thing, she is raving again!" I heard the old nurse say: and rising from her chair, she approached the couch quickly: but she looked pleased as her eyes fell upon me—for she doubtless saw that I now appeared rational and collected, though labouring under the torturing excitement of suspense.

"Tell me—for heaven's sake tell me," I asked, "how long I have been here?"

"Now don't fret yourself, my dear child," said the old nurse in a soothing tone: "but——"

"I adjure you," was my almost frenzied interruption, "if you would spare me fresh ravings—for you have alluded to them—do tell me how long I have been here?"

"Let me see?" she said. "Thursday night—yes, it was Thursday night—and this is——"

"What, what? Do speak, for heaven's sake!"

"Well, then, it's Tuesday morning."

"Ah! it perhaps is not too late," I ejaculated, as the idea struck me that even if Leonard Percival's trial was over and that the result had gone against him, the fearful sentence of the law could not yet have been carried into execution.

As my lips sent forth that exclamation, I felt a sudden giving way of the energy which had for a few moments inspired me during the above brief colloquy; and closing my eyes, I experienced a sort of necessity of lying perfectly still, so as to allow nature to compose herself again.

"Poor girl, she has fainted!" said the nurse, who evidently had the habit of soliloquising aloud: and the next instant I felt the effect of salts applied to my nostrils.

"Thank you," I said in a feeble voice as I opened my eyes again: "I was merely resting myself after the exertion of speaking."

"Then pray don't speak, my dear," said the nurse: "but lie quiet, and I will at once make you some nice gruel——"

"My kind friend," I interrupted her, "pray listen to me a few moments:"—and I looked earnestly up into her countenance, which was benevolent and full of an encouraging cheerfulness.

"Well, my dear," she answered, "I know that it's sometimes best to humour invalids: it allays excitement: and so you had better speak out at once, whatever you have got to say."

"I myself have for the present but little to say," was my response. "I wish to learn from you where I am—to whom I am indebted for a kindness which I feel has rescued me from death—and, in a word, all the circumstances of my positio beneath this roof?"

"Well, my dear child," answered the nurse, "this is called Merton House, and belongs to Captain Calder—an old retired Navy officer—very rich and very good-natured. Last Thursday evening, at about five o'clock, as I was told,—for I don't live in the house altogether,—a ring at the bell was heard—the footman went out and found you stretched at the gate. He gave an alarm—you was brought in, and put to bed, good kind Mrs. Calder doing all she could for you. Dr. Scott, who lives at the village up yonder, was sent for at once, and said you was very ill, worn out with cold and fatigue—perhaps with hunger too. No letters or anything were found about you, to show who you was; and so your friends could not be written to. Mrs. Calder asked what was to be done? Captain Calder swore with a great big oath, that you should be taken as much care of as if you was a Duke's daughter; and young Master Edward—that's the Captain's son, who, by the bye, helped the footman to bring you in from the gate—declared that it would be a shame not to treat you with all possible kindness. So here you was kept, and I was sent for from the village to take care of you—because, you see, my calling is a nurse's——"

"And have I been so very ill?" I asked.

"My dear child, you have been delirious and have said many strange things. But all that's nothing: you have not said any harm of yourself—and people in their ravings, when they have done wrong, are pretty sure to let it out. I can tell you that Mrs. Calder has already taken a great fancy to you; and I am sure, my poor girl, I am as happy to see that the fever has left you as if anybody had given me a fifty pound note."

I expressed all I felt at having thus fallen in with such kind friends, and after a brief pause, said, "Now, my dear nurse, I am going to ask you a very strange question: but pray answer me at once and in as direct a manner as possible. Do you know whether a person named Leonard Percival——"

"Ah! you have mentioned him a hundred times in your ravings," exclaimed the nurse. "You are interested in him?—perhaps you know him?—perhaps you are related to him?—perhaps, poor girl, you were travelling to Derby to see him when you sank down in weariness at the gate of Merton House?—or perhaps——"

I know not how many more times the good old creature would have gone on with her "perhaps," had I not interrupted her by saying, "You have not answered my question, nor even allowed me to put it. Pray tell me, is he tried yet?"

"Well, if I must speak out, I must," said the dame: "and so the truth is, as I have been told, the trial is on to-day."

"To-day!" I echoed. "Then there is no time to lose;"—and with a sudden access of energy, blended with a deep resolute calmness which even surprised myself, I sat up in the couch and said in a grave tone, "Now, my good friend, let me tell you that Leonard Percival's life or death are in my hands."

The dame shook her head sorrowfully: she evidently thought the delirium of fever was coming

back—and I understood full well what was thus passing in her mind.

"No," I continued, "I am not raving now. It is with a solemn calmness that I am addressing you; and God is inspiring me with strength that I may fulfil my mission. Will you be kind enough to go and tell Mrs. Calder that I beseech an immediate interview with her?"

The old nurse looked at me very steadily and very earnestly for upwards of a minute—doubtless to assure herself that I was in my right state of mind and not speaking in delirium. As steadily and as earnestly did I meet her gaze; and she said, "Well, my dear, I will do as you ask me. But you must lie down and promise to remain quite quiet for a minute, while I go and fetch Mrs. Calder."

"But one more word!" I exclaimed. "The trial is on to-day, you tell me? What o'clock is it now?"—and I awaited the response with a fevered suspense.

"Well, it must be just upon eleven o'clock in the forenoon," was the answer so anxiously expected.

"Now then," said I, sinking down upon my pillow, "go and fetch Mrs. Calder; and I promise to remain as quiet as possible until you come back."

The worst of it is that the best-intentioned people in the world never can do things, under such circumstances as these, with a haste suitable to the patience of the invalid or the individual who endures the suspense. Thus was it with the old nurse. She would remain a minute to smooth the pillow—to arrange the bed-clothes—to ask me two or three times whether I was sure I felt better—then to poke the fire and put coals on—then to set three or four things to rights and "tidy up the room," as she called it;—and then, even when she *did* reach the door, she lingered at it for nearly another minute while she looked around to assure herself, in her own words, "that the place was fit to be seen." Poor old creature! she meant well, and what she did was done kindly: but Oh! if she only knew what suspense I endured while she was thus delaying and loitering! However, away she went at last; and during the three or four minutes of her absence, I arranged in my mind to what extent it was necessary to enter upon explanations with Mrs. Calder. But the reader may be assured that I was resolved to be as explicit as possible, and tell her everything that was necessary, without being compelled to touch upon those particulars that would compromise Lady Harlesdon's honour. I therefore saw the necessity of suppressing the incident relative to the Gipsy Queen in her disguise of Sir Aubrey Claverings: for how could I account for it, if mentioned, otherwise than by stating the real fact—namely, that it was done as a vile contrivance on the part of Lord Harlesdon to plant a dagger in his wife's heart by making her believe that he whom she loved had taken her own nurse maid as his mistress? Yes—I came to the conclusion that it was absolutely necessary to suppress this fact; because I could not give any explanation for it without stifling the real truth and drawing upon my imagination—and I would not tell a falsehood.

In three or four minutes Mrs. Calder made her appearance, followed by the nurse. The lady was about forty-five years old—not very tall, but stout, and possessing the remains of beauty. What was much better, however, than her still handsome profile and fine eyes, was the unmistakable benevolence that beamed upon those features and shone in those eyes. It was impossible to conceive her capable of a harsh word unnecessarily spoken, or an unkind action deliberately done. She seemed one of those excellent beings whose existence in the world must be taken as a set-off against the cruelty and uncharitableness of others, and whose lives are oases in the great desert of humanity.

With a smiling, but also a wondering countenance, she approached the bed; so that while I at once felt assured that in her I should find a friend, I likewise saw that the old nurse had already excited her curiosity by recounting what I had said. She took my hand—bent over the couch—and kissed me with a real affection which made my heart yearn towards her: for Oh! I did so feel the want of some one to be kind and good to me after all that I had suffered and all the bitter experience I had recently obtained of the villany and the heartlessness of the world! I flung my arms around her neck and strained her head to my bosom while tears flowed from my eyes—but tears rather of joy than of sorrow! It was a melting moment, ineffably delicious for me: yes, for me who had so recently known all the anguish and the bitter woe of the forlorn outcast's fate.

Mrs. Calder was deeply affected by my conduct; and being thoroughly sincere and well-meaning herself, she evidently entertained not the slightest doubt of my sincerity. Indeed, she gave me this assurance. For as she kissed me again, she said, "Poor child! purity and candour sit upon your brow, and innocence is in your looks. But even if you have erred, God knows you must have suffered deeply, deeply—and I would rather pour balm into your wounds than tear them open afresh."

"O dear kind lady!" I murmured, in a voice trembling with emotions profoundly stirred, "my heart has indeed been severely lacerated—but through no guilt of mine. No, no—I can look you in the face, my benefactress, and tell you in all confidence, and with an attesting heaven to hear, that I have suffered because I have preferred virtue to infamy!"

"I am sure that you are speaking the truth, my dear child," returned Mrs. Calder: "for your looks are even far more impressive than your words. But the nurse tells me that you wish to speak upon urgent matters. Shall it be in her presence? or will you have her quit the room?"

"Oh! in her presence, by all means!" I answered: "for I have seen enough of her not merely to be convinced of her worthiness, but likewise to be imbued with the sincerest gratitude towards her."

"Well, my dear, she shall stay then. Go back to your arm-chair, nurse: I will sit down here by the side of the bed. But really," added Mrs. Calder, in a more serious tone, "I do not know what Dr. Scott will say when he hears that his patient has been allowed to talk so much."

"It would do me far more harm were I constrained to hold my peace altogether: for I have very grave and weighty matters to communicate. Besides," I continued, "not only have I much to say, but likewise much to do—and that promptly

also. However, without waste of time I will enter upon those explanations for which, dear lady, I crave your patience."

Thereupon I commenced my narrative by telling Mrs. Calder who I was, and giving a rapid sketch of those incidents connected with my family that are already known to the reader. I was well pleased to observe that the mention of my name produced no disagreeable effect upon the lady; so that I at once concluded she was personally unacquainted with the Harlesdons, and that the odious calumny respecting myself and Sir Aubrey Clavering had not been wafted to Merton House. I went on to state that I had been in service at Twisden Lodge and at a grocer's in Dover, and that I had then entered Lady Harlesdon's household. I glanced at the adventure concerning the stealing of little Isabella, and thereby accounted for the affectionate friendship which her ladyship had formed for me. I spoke of the persecutions I had experienced from Sir Aubrey Clavering previous to my forcible abduction to the White Cottage. I explained at length everything connected with Leonard Percival, Ellen Kirkland, and Jacob Harper. It was likewise necessary—most necessary indeed—that I should mention the name of John Morley. I described how I had been carried off—how I was detained for eighteen days at the White Cottage—how I had escaped—the privations I had endured—and how I first heard of the arrest and committal of Leonard Percival on a charge of murdering and robbing Jacob Harper. Finally, I made Mrs. Calder thoroughly understand the motives of my anxiety to reach Derby as soon as possible, and how it was of paramount importance that I should, even at any risk, rise at once from my sick bed and proceed thither without delay.

An hour had elapsed during all these explanations and the discourse which followed: it was now therefore twelve o'clock. Mrs. Calder hastened down stairs to give her husband and son a rapid outline of all I had told her; and fortunately, at the same moment, as I presently heard, Dr. Scott made his appearance. This saved the telling of the story twice over; and in a short time Mrs. Calder returned to my chamber, accompanied by the medical man. He was an elderly, kind-looking, and mild-speaking person, and evidently felt deeply interested in all he had just heard. He asked me many questions relative to the state of my feelings in a physical sense, his object being to ascertain whether I could possibly bear the fatigue of a journey and the excitement of appearing in a court of justice without danger to my life.

"Is it practicable, doctor?" asked Mrs. Calder.

"I hardly know what to say," was the reply, delivered in a grave and measured tone. "Were it for any purpose of lesser importance than the one in view, I should positively forbid my young patient's removal: but when we consider that the life of a fellow-creature is at stake—and what perhaps he even values more than life, namely his character—I dare not assert the physician's power and say *no*. Besides, if a negative were put upon Mary Price's wish, the excitement she would experience might prove fatal. Therefore, all things considered," added the doctor after a pause, "she must go."

"Rest assured sir," I cried, overjoyed at this permission, "that God will give me strength to sustain myself amidst the fatigues to be endured."

"But those fatigues, my dear child," Mrs. Calder hastened to observe, "shall be mitigated as much as possible. You shall be well wrapped up in warm clothing, and shall recline on pillows inside the carriage. I will accompany you, and Dr. Scott must also go with us. Will you not, doctor?"

"Without doubt," was the reply. "Now, nurse, let her have some gruel or broth, and then see about dressing her. In an hour we must depart. There will be plenty of time: for a trial of this nature is sure to last the best portion of the day, and it is but seven miles to Derby."

The doctor now quitted the room; the nurse prepared me some refreshment; and Mrs. Calder sat down to converse with me while I partook of it. She and the nurse then assisted me to rise and perform the task of the toilet. I was stronger than they fancied I should have been: that is to say, I could stand without assistance; though of course still very weak and feeble. But it was doubtless the excitement of my feelings that thus nerved me with an unnatural power, slight though it were. When I looked at myself in the glass I was shocked to observe how deadly pale I was, and how sunken my cheeks had become: but Mrs. Calder, who witnessed my emotion, hastened to reassure me by exclaiming, "You will soon get your good looks again, my dear girl: for when once this business at Derby is over, you shall come back to be taken the best possible care of, and we will see if we cannot soon set you to rights again."

To be brief, I was dressed in due course, and sat down near the fire to rest a little until the carriage was ready. Meanwhile Mrs. Calder went to put on her own things; and when she came back it was to escort me down stairs. On being introduced into a handsomely-furnished sitting-room, I was presented to Captain Calder and Mr. Edward. The father was a tall stout gentleman, with a red face, light blue eyes full of merriment and good humour, and a mien which at once denoted the frank honest-hearted and gallant veteran. He wore a blue coat with anchor-buttons, a black neck-cloth, a buff waistcoat, and hessian boots. His son, Mr. Edward Calder, was a slender, tall, handsome young gentleman, of about three-and-twenty. He had chesnut hair and fine blue eyes—a very amiable expression of countenance—and the same candour of look and manner which characterized his parents.

Captain Calder grasped me by the hand and shook it with a degree of warmth that was more creditable to his own kind feeling than suitable to my invalid condition; and he exclaimed in a hearty tone, "Why, you are a perfect heroine—a sort of modern female knight-errant! But I am truly glad to see that you are able to get about again; and depend upon it, my girl, you shall not want friends so long as there are people bearing the honest name of Calder in existence."

I thanked him with tearful eyes for his goodness. Mr. Edward then took my hand, saying, as he regarded me with evident sympathy, "And I also congratulate you upon your recovery."

These good people did not treat me as a servant-maid, although they knew that I had been one; and if anything were now wanting to cheer my

mind and inspire me with courage to go through what I had this day undertaken, their generosity and open-heartedness would have accomplished that result.

The carriage drove close up to the door, and I was conveyed into it,—pillows having been already placed for my accommodation. Mrs. Calder and the doctor accompanied me inside; and Mr. Edward, well wrapped up in his great coat, mounted the box by the side of the coachman. The Captain was expecting a visit on business of importance, or he would have gone likewise. All the arrangements being completed, the equipage drove away.

During my illness the weather had considerably changed. It will be recollected that it was frosty and bitterly chill when I was wandering about houseless and friendless, wretched and starving: it was now strangely warm for the season of the year—the month of January. Not a breath of wind stirred the skeleton boughs of the trees; and there was that kind of awful stillness in the atmosphere which usually precedes a storm. The aspect of the heavens too was similarly ominous; for masses of black clouds were piling themselves up on the empyrean vault, and they looked as if cradling the lightning and charged with the thunder.

But here I must interrupt the regular thread of my narrative in order to give certain details, as I subsequently gleaned them from a report of the trial which appeared in a Derby newspaper.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TRIAL.

At about ten o'clock in the forenoon, on the day of which I am writing, Leonard Percival was placed in the dock to take his trial before Judge Baily on a charge of having feloniously slain and killed Jacob Harper, a gamekeeper in the service of Lord Harlesdon.

A jury had been duly empannelled; and it was easy to perceive (as the newspaper report stated) by their countenances, that they were awfully impressed with the solemnity of the occasion and purpose for which they were summoned. The court was crowded to excess, the case having excited an immense sensation throughout the entire county. Lord Harlesdon, whose presence was needed as a witness, was accommodated with a seat upon the bench: for aristocratic rank is invariably a passport to such favour in this country. As it subsequently appeared, Ellen Kirkland and Mrs. Baker had been earnestly enjoined by Leonard not to be in the court during the trial: for the prisoner feared lest the presence of her whom he loved so tenderly and who was profoundly afflicted on his account, should unman him. There were several witnesses in attendance besides Lord Harlesdon; and amongst them was John Morley. Through the kindness of the Sheriffs, counsel was provided for Leonard Percival, he having had no means of providing for his defence, all the money he had in his possession at the time of his capture being taken away from him.

Leonard Percival entered the dock with a firm step; and having bowed respectfully to the Judge, remained standing with his arms folded across his chest. There was nothing insolent nor presumptuous in his manner; but his look was calm and collected; and many persons in the crowd whispered to each other that if he were really guilty he must be a man of no ordinary courage to be able to assume such a demeanour.

The trial began in the usual manner, the counsel for the prosecution stating the case. With the outline of this the reader is already acquainted: it will therefore be unnecessary to recapitulate the particulars of it. Any deficiency in that sketch will be supplied by the evidence given on the occasion. The first witness called was one of the under-gamekeepers. He deposed that as he and two of his comrades were crossing a field in the immediate neighbourhood of Harlesdon Park, at an early hour on the morning of the 22nd of December, they beheld something dark lying in the pathway, and could not immediately distinguish what it was, the dawn being yet far off. On approaching the object, they discovered that it was a corpse; and to their horror recognized the head-gamekeeper, Jacob Harper. He was quite cold, and had evidently been dead some hours. The mortal wound had been inflicted with a clasp-knife, having a long blade pointed like a dagger; and it was lying near, having been evidently tossed away by the murderer's hand after the death-blow was given. The pockets had been rifled of everything they contained, and had even been turned inside out. The corpse was removed to Harlesdon Park; and at about the same time it was discovered that Leonard Percival had escaped from the stable where he had been confined. That he was the perpetrator of the deed was immediately suspected, and numerous persons were despatched in all directions in pursuit of him.

A surgeon deposed to having been sent for to Harlesdon Park from the nearest village, at about seven in the morning of the day referred to by the former witness. He had examined the corpse, and was of opinion that the deceased must have been dead several hours. The wound was inflicted by the clasp-knife, and the blow was evidently given by a resolute and determined hand. Death must have been instantaneous.

Lord Harlesdon was the third witness examined. He stated that on the evening of the 21st of December, he had passed a sentence of imprisonment upon Leonard Percival for a charge of poaching. During the examination Percival had conducted himself in a most unbecoming manner, and had certainly manifested a particular dislike towards the deceased Jacob Harper. It was the deceased who had arrested Percival and prosecuted the charge on that occasion. Percival was lodged in a loft over the stables for the night; but he had escaped, although at what hour of that night it was impossible to say. Lord Harlesdon concluded by stating that on the same evening of which he had been speaking, he had occasion to give the deceased Jacob Harper a 100*l.* note, half of which amount was to be handed over to his lordship's groom John Morley. It was Harper who took charge of the note for the purpose of changing it.

John Morley was next examined. He stated that on the night in question he had to go to sleep at Farmer Jones's, of whom he was going to buy a lot of hay and straw for his lordship. He wanted

a portion of the money which had been given to Harper for the purpose of paying for the hay and straw. Harper, who lived at the gamekeeper's lodge at a short distance from the Park, had told Morley that he had plenty of small notes and gold at home, and would therefore give change for the 100*l.* note which Lord Harlesdon had placed in his hands. Morley accordingly asked him to step across to the Park with the money, which Jacob Harper promised to do. But he did not come; and therefore Morley went off at about eleven o'clock without waiting any longer for him, and passed the night at Farmer Jones's. When he returned to the Park in the morning he was horrified at hearing what had happened, the terrible deed but too well accounting for why the unfortunate Jacob Harper had not kept his appointment.

A labouring man of the name of Morrison was now examined; but he gave his evidence with great reluctance as well as emotion,—he being well inclined towards the prisoner and having known him for many years. Morrison deposed to the effect that Mrs. Baker and Ellen Kirkland came to his cottage, which was about two miles from the Park, between eleven and twelve o'clock on the night alluded to by the preceding witnesses. Morrison and his wife were in bed; but they went down and let Mrs. Baker and Ellen in. The two women were much agitated. They told him about Leonard's arrest, but said they had good reason to believe he would be able to escape and join them there; in which case they would all three fly to some distant part of the country. It must have been past twelve—perhaps near one in the morning—when Leonard came. He had escaped: but he did not tell the witness how. He was full of spirits, and showed a quantity of notes and gold, saying that a kind friend had given him the amount. He stated it to be a hundred pounds. He offered the witness a handful of guineas for his kindness and for old friendship's sake: but Morrison somehow or another did not like the aspect of the affair—there seemed so much mystery in it. His suspicions were also excited by observing blood upon Leonard's hand; and he pointed it out to him. Leonard looked sorrowful, and then suddenly said that it was the blood of the angel who had liberated him, and who had cut her finger in so doing. As he spoke these words Leonard had looked significantly at Mrs. Baker and Ellen; and they seemed to understand him. Morrison therefore thought it was all right, and his suspicions were tranquillized: but he would take none of the money, and Leonard Percival went away almost immediately with Mrs. Baker and Ellen.

The next witness examined was a constable belonging to the village near Harlesdon Park. Acting upon certain instructions received from Lord Harlesdon, he had set off on horseback armed with a warrant for the apprehension of Leonard Percival. He succeeded in tracing him, and took him into custody in the forenoon of the 22nd, at a distance of about twenty miles from the Park. Mrs. Baker and Ellen Kirkland were with him; and the constable arrested them all three, just as they were on the point of entering a stage-coach in which they had taken three places. Leonard Percival protested his innocence; and the women, who were terribly afflicted, did the same. There were marks of blood upon the sleeves of Percival's coat, and one of his shirt-cuffs was likewise stained with blood. This was the cuff on the right wrist. The constable concluded by stating that when he searched the person of Leonard, he found about him notes and gold to the value of close upon a hundred pounds, the difference being what might have been spent on refreshments or such matters.

Here it was mentioned to the Judge and jury that at the Coroner's inquest, and also before the examining magistrate, it was conceived that there was no evidence against the two women, and they were accordingly discharged from custody; but that Leonard Percival had been committed for trial alike by the magistrate and the Coroner's warrant.

The examination of several witnesses was now proceeded with, in order to prove that Leonard Percival had frequently been heard speaking in disparaging terms of Jacob Harper; also with a view to show that he was jealous of him on account of Ellen Kirkland. The depositions which were taken on the occasion of Leonard's examination at Harlesdon Park, were then produced; and the version which Jacob Harper had on that evening given of his quarrel with Leonard in the field on account of not opening the gate for Dr. Vincent and Lord Miltown, was thus brought before the court. The reader will remember that Harper had deposed to the effect that Leonard had snatched the gun out of his hand, knocked him down with the butt-end of it, and then out of sheer malignity taken an aim at one of the dogs and killed him on the spot. As a matter of course the reading of these depositions produced a very strong sensation in the court, and prejudiced every mind against the prisoner.

The counsel for the prosecution did not fail to make the best of the case in his hands: nor indeed was it difficult to render it excessively black against the unfortunate Leonard Percival. It was shown that he had a long-cherished hatred against Jacob Harper, and that they had had a serious quarrel within a few hours of the murder; while the circumstance of wilfully shooting the dog, as alleged, seemed to stamp the prisoner as a malignant and evil-disposed person. His condemnation to imprisonment so soon after that quarrel, could not have been calculated to mitigate his animosity against the deceased gamekeeper, by whom the charge of poaching was preferred. What followed, as the learned counsel went on to state, seemed clear and intelligible enough; and he begged the Judge and jury to observe that by the completeness of the evidence the prisoner might be followed step by step, as it were, to the perpetration of his crime. Not a link, the barrister affirmed, was wanting to complete the chain of evidence. Leonard Percival had escaped from the loft over the stable at Harlesdon Park; and the time when he thus escaped could be pretty well conjectured through the statement of Morrison, who described the hour at which he reached his (Morrison's) cottage. Now, in proceeding from Harlesdon Park to that cottage, Leonard Percival would cross the very field where the corpse was found; and it was shown by the evidence of John Morley that the deceased Jacob Harper must have been on his way to the Park with the change for the hundred pound note in his pocket at that very time. The

case was as clear as possible. Leonard Percival, in escaping, encountered him whom he regarded as his mortal enemy, and had murdered him. Having committed this crime, the traces of which remained in blood-marks upon his person, he plundered his victim of all that was about him. His confusion at Morrison's house, when the blood-stains were pointed out, was another evidence of guilt. But if any farther proof were wanting, was it not afforded by the fact that the sum found upon the person of the prisoner when captured by the constable, was within a few shillings of that which the gamekeeper must have had about his person at the time of the murder? The learned counsel for the prosecution went on to declare that to his mind no case was ever more complete, no accusation ever more fully borne out; and he concluded a long and eloquent address amidst a breathless silence on the part of every listener.

The counsel whom the Sheriffs employed on the part of Leonard Percival, had throughout the trial done the best he could for his client. But how was it possible to struggle against evidence so complete as that which circumstances had combined to overwhelm the prisoner in the dock? The statement for the defence certainly wore not the aspect of truth. It was contended that Leonard Percival had no animosity against Jacob Harper, but merely experienced a natural indignation at having been unjustly accused of laying snares and poaching. The real version of the scene in the field when the gun went off and killed the pointer, was given: but it looked like a lame palliation. Then as to the rest, it was declared by the counsel for the defence that a nursery-maid who was in the service of Lord Harlesdon at the time, and whose name was Mary Price, had taken compassion on Leonard Percival—had assisted him to escape—and had cut her hand while so doing; thus accounting for the blood upon his garments. The money found upon him he had likewise received from Mary Price, who had told him at the time from whom it came: but a sense of honour induced the prisoner to suppress any revelation on that head. It was likewise declared that although, in escaping, the prisoner admitted having passed through the field where the corpse was discovered, yet he had not gone by the pathway, but had traversed it diagonally as a nearer cut towards Morrison's cottage. It was moreover stated that every endeavour had been made to procure the attendance of Mary Price for the trial, but that she had disappeared on the very same night when the murder was perpetrated. The counsel for the defence frankly admitted that circumstantial evidence had combined in a very extraordinary manner against the prisoner; but he warned the jury against being led away by impressions which might after all prove erroneous: and he quoted several remarkable cases to show how lives had been sacrificed under circumstances which had for the moment told most strongly against the accused, but which at a later period were explained in quite a different sense, establishing innocence where guilt had formerly seemed undoubted.

It was now three o'clock in the afternoon, and the sky had become so overcast that it was necessary to light the candles in the court. The inefficiency of these lights, by leaving the spacious hall in a state of little more than semi-obscurity, added to the solemn awfulness of the scene: but still, as throughout all the former part of the proceedings, the deportment of the prisoner was firm and manly—his look calm and resolute, yet respectful. Indeed, a kind of martyrized expression had been growing upon his features, as he gradually perceived that the evidence was telling more and more against him: but little sympathy was felt for Leonard Percival now—every one was convinced of his guilt.

Judge Baily summed up with clearness, precision, and impartiality. He was a most venerable-looking man—his voice was deep and solemn—his manner mournfully impressive. At length, at about half-past three o'clock, the case was left entirely in the hands of the jury. They did not even quit the box; but merely stood up, grouped themselves together, and spoke in low whispers for a few minutes. Save and except the subdued rustling of those voices, there was not a sound to be heard throughout the hall: the very breath of the audience appeared to be suspended. For though none doubted what the verdict would be, there was nevertheless something awful in those few moments which preceded the going forth of the *one* word that was to declare the prisoner's doom.

Standing up in the dock, with arms folded, pale cheeks, and compressed lips, Leonard Percival was now evidently suffering deep inward emotion. He could not blind himself to the awful horror of his position; and how could he shut out from his mind the image of that beauteous and well-beloved girl whose heart would be broken by the same decree that condemned *him* to death?

At the expiration of the few minutes mentioned, the jury turned round towards the Judge again, and took their seats: then, their whispering having ceased, awful was the stillness that prevailed in the court. A pin might have been heard, had it dropped. Before the verdict was pronounced, it was read upon the faces of the jurymen. Those countenances wore a solemn mournfulness, showing that although they were prepared to do their duty and decide according to their consciences, yet that they did not the less feel the awful responsibility of their position. And now that profound stillness was broken by the loud voice of the Clerk of Arraigns, demanding what verdict was to be recorded? The foreman pronounced it in a tone which seemed to fall like a blow upon every brain—so tremendous is it to hear that word *Guilty*, when uttered under circumstances that must send a human being to the scaffold! A ghastly pallor swept over the features of Leonard Percival—and he staggered back a pace: then instantly recovering his firmness of limb, he compressed his lips tightly to still their quivering; but he seemed unconscious of the two tears that were trickling down his cheeks.

The Judge put on the black cap—Oh, ominous and tremendous emblem!—and in the deepest solemnity of his voice, asked the prisoner the usual question—what he had to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon him?

"My lord," replied Leonard Percival in a voice that was low and slightly tremulous, "I declare in the presence of the Almighty that I am innocent of this deed of blood. If it were possible for human eyes to plunge their looks deep down into the recesses of my heart, it would be seen how utterly incapable I am of such a crime. But, truth-

fully speaking I cannot be astonished at the verdict which the jury have returned; and if ever the day should come—as I trust and believe it will, for I have faith in God—that my innocence shall be made apparent, when I may be mouldering in my premature grave,—I do not think that they will have reason to blame themselves for the decision to which they have this day come. I feel, my lord, that if I were seated in that jury-box, and under similar circumstances, I should have arrived at the same conclusion. For, as my counsel has declared, a frightful amount of circumstantial evidence has combined against me. For myself, though inwardly conscious of my innocence, I confess that I am bewildered and perplexed when endeavouring to seek a solution of the terrible mystery. I know, I say, that I am innocent; but I can not conjecture who may have been the guilty one. Nevertheless, my lord, if it were possible to prove that I at least am innocent, it would not be requisite to show who *is* culpable. And there is one person who, if she could have been found, would have proved mine innocence. It was to her—to Mary Price—whom I alluded at Morrison's cottage, when I said that it was an angel's blood which dyed my hand. Alas! I fear that Mary Price herself must have sustained some calamity—some foul play: for I know the goodness of her heart too well not to be assured that if she were alive or at liberty, she would fly hither to proclaim the words that might save me. Alas! everything has gone against me—the evidence of circumstances has been overwhelming—her absence has proved fatal. Oh! my lord," exclaimed the unhappy young man, his voice now swelling with the sudden excitement of his highly wrought feelings, "the doom you are about to pronounce is not death for *one* alone—it is death for *two!* It will kill *me*—and kill *her* who loves me too well to live when I shall be no more! My lord, it is terrible to stand here an innocent man, yet to be branded with infamous crimes and adjudged to receive the felon's fate. But even at the last moment God may save me—heaven may help me yet! O Mary Price, if you be alive, come—come—I beseech you!" exclaimed the unhappy prisoner, his voice now thrilling with ineffable anguish, so that there was scarcely an unmoistened eye in the court. "If you be alive, I say, come to save me!—but though you should be dead, I adjure you to rise up even from the tomb itself, and proclaim mine innocence!"

"I come—I come!" a voice was heard to cry in sudden response to that wild appeal. That voice was mine: for I had that very instant entered the court, supported between Mrs. Calder and Mr. Edward.

It would be impossible to describe the effect produced by this strange occurrence. The unsnuffed candles were burning with an ominous dimness—the countenances of jury, judge, barristers, and audience, looked ghastly in the uncertain light. A sort of consternation fell upon all present, as my voice sounded in response to that solemn adjuration which had demanded my presence even from the very tomb. For nearly a minute a profound silence—a silence like that of death—had followed the answer I gave: but all eyes were fixed upon me—and the crowd reverentially made way, with mechanical instinct, as I advanced leaning upon the arms of my friends, the doctor closely following behind. Having but just risen from a sick bed, I looked pale as death, and as ghastly also! No wonder, then, that all the eyes which concentrated their looks upon my countenance, surveyed me with awe and doubt, as if scarcely knowing whether it were indeed a living creature or a corpse from the grave that had thus answered the prisoner's wild and impassioned adjuration. Altogether it was a scene so solemnly impressive, so deeply awe-inspiring, that even as I write of it now, it is as fresh to my memory as if it had occurred but yesterday.

Suddenly a change came over the aspect of all present.

"It is she! it is she!" were the words that thrilled from the lips of Leonard Percival; and falling upon his knees in the dock, he extended his arms upward, exclaiming, "I thank thee, O Lord—I bless thee, my God—for this wonderful proof of thy mercy!"—then covering his face with his hands, he burst into a passionate fit of weeping ——the strong man cried like a child!

Indescribable was the sensation produced upon all present. The judge himself was affected—some of the jury burst into tears—and I heard people near me sob aloud. The counsel for the prisoner advanced to meet me, and Mr. Edward whispered a few explanatory words in his ear. The counsel looked astounded for a moment—then hastened to whisper something in his turn to the Judge; and his lordship exclaimed in a loud voice, "Usher of the court, keep the doors—let no one go forth!" There was a pause—a solemn pause of profoundest silence once more; and then the Judge spoke again, saying, "Let John Morley be placed under arrest!"

An immense sensation now pervaded the court. Lord Harlesdon gave vent to an audible ejaculation of mingled astonishment and horror; and Leonard Percival, starting up from his knees, echoed the name of John Morley, adding, "Is it possible? Harper's friend!"

Meanwhile some of the Sheriff's javelin men had seized upon Morley, towards whom all eyes were now turned. I had taken a seat, in company with my friends, at the barristers' table; and the counsel for the defence, rising again, said, "My lord, the young woman, Mary Price, who is now in court, has just risen from a bed of sickness. Impelled by a sense of duty which, though it *is* a duty, is nevertheless most generously performed in this instance, because it is at the risk of her life,—she has come hither to state what she knows. I have to request your lordship that she may be examined while seated."

This request was at once acceded to by Judge Baily; and I retained my place at the barristers' table, where, as the reader may suppose, I was the object of universal attention and interest.

"Although I am pretty well acquainted," the counsel for the defence then said, "with the leading points of the evidence which Miss Price can give, inasmuch as I described them in my speech, yet under the very peculiar circumstances of the present case, your lordship may probably deem it advisable to allow her to tell her story in her own way?"

Again the Judge consented. I was then duly sworn; and in a stronger voice than I had even hoped to be able to find for the occasion—with

greater nerve too than I had fancied myself capable of exerting—I spoke in the following manner:—

"My lord, and gentlemen of the jury, it is in my power to throw much light upon the unhappy subject of this day's solemn investigation. First of all let me state that I was a witness of the whole transaction that took place between Leonard Percival and Jacob Harper in the earlier part of that day which was destined to be marked with so many important incidents. Jacob Harper was altogether the aggressor. It is sad to be compelled to speak evil of the dead: but the truth must be told."

I then gave a brief outline of what really took place on that occasion,—how Harper was over anxious to manifest his zeal on behalf of Dr. Vincent and Lord Miltown—how he seized upon Leonard Percival—how the gun fell and went off, thus by accident killing the dog.

"Of the examination which took place before Lord Harlesdon I was a witness," I went on to say; "and I am bound to state that Jacob Harper committed perjury to a degree that made my blood run cold. Leonard Percival desired to call me as a witness; but Lord Harlesdon would not permit him."

I then proceeded to explain how I had fainted behind the curtain in the library at Harlesdon Park; and without entering into much detail respecting the conversation I had there overheard, I stated that Lord Harlesdon gave the gamekeeper a hundred pound note of which amount fifty pounds were to go to Morley—and that subsequently, after Lord Harlesdon had quitted the library, I had heard Harper and Morley make some appointment for the purpose of dividing the money, but for when or where I did not at the time catch. I then went on to state that I had besought and implored Lady Harlesdon to interest herself on behalf of Percival, whom I knew to be innocent of the offence of poaching; and that

her ladyship had generously given me a hundred pounds to present to him. I even specified the nature of the money—sixty pounds in bank-notes, and forty pounds in gold.

Here the counsel for the defence, hastily referring to his brief, said, "My lord, this exactly corresponds with the nature of the money found about the person of Leonard Percival:"—and the announcement produced a great sensation in the court.

I now resumed my address, and went on to state that it was really I myself who effected Leonard Percival's deliverance, and that I cut my hand with a knife while severing the cords that bound his wrists. I described how I had forgotten to take the money with me to the stable, but how I subsequently met Percival at the stile leading into the fields and gave him the money then and there. I likewise explained how it was in consequence of certain information which I gave him, that he sped to rejoin Mrs. Baker and Ellen Kirkland at the Morrisons' cottage.

Having partaken of a glass of water—for I was growing faint—I went on to say that immediately after I parted from Leonard Percival, I met John Morley and a hostler, by whom I was borne off and thrust into a post-chaise; and I then described that strange and awful terror into which I was thrown by Morley's manner when, awakening to consciousness in the vehicle, I happened to say "that I had no fear of his murdering me."

At this stage of the proceedings a voice exclaimed in a tone of wild anguish, "I confess it all, my lord! I confess it all! Heaven itself has sent Mary Price to appear against me!"—and John Morley, bursting away from those who held him in their grasp, rushed into the middle of the open space in the centre of the court near the barristers' table, and fell down upon his knees, extending his arms in a frantic manner towards the Judge.

I beheld this scene, at once so awful and so exciting: but I beheld no more. A sudden dizziness seized upon me—the countenances of Judge, jury, barristers, and spectators faded from my view—the whole tribunal disappeared as if in a phantasmagorian mist, and consciousness abandoned me.

CHAPTER XL.

AFTER THE TRIAL.

WHEN I returned to my senses I found myself lying upon a sofa in an apartment belonging to the court, and which I afterwards learnt to be the Judge's robing-room. Familiar faces surrounded me. Dr. Scott was holding one of my hands, with his fingers upon my wrist, evidently feeling my pulse—kind-hearted Mrs. Calder was close by his side, with a bason containing vinegar and water—and immediately behind her, was her son Edward, looking on with a countenance expressive of the deepest interest. Such was the little group on my left hand. On my right—for the sofa was drawn away from the wall, thus permitting persons to stand on either side—Ellen Kirkland was on her knees, pressing my hand to her lips and bathing it with tears of joy: by her side knelt Leonard Percival, now at liberty once again;—and leaning upon his shoulder was worthy Mrs. Baker, pouring forth audible prayers on my behalf.

Never shall I forget how solemnly yet sweetly interesting was this scene to which I awoke; and methinks I feel now in my heart the vibration of those ineffable emotions which the spectacle conjured up. Ellen Kirkland threw her arms round my neck, embracing me with an affectionate tenderness which could not be exceeded if shown by a sister; and my heart swelled as in thus receiving the proofs of her gratitude and joy, I was amply rewarded for all I had done. Then Mrs. Baker embraced me also; and Leonard Percival, still on his knees by my side, addressed me in a manner the tones and words of which I never can forget.

"Mary Price," he said,—"for in that familiar way will you permit me to speak, as now and henceforth, until the day of my death, must I consider you as a sister,—you have proved a guardian angel to me! Language has no power to convey all I feel towards you; and the world has never known a sacrifice that I would not be prepared to make to testify my gratitude. Were it needful I would lay down my life to serve you. Beyond this I can say nothing——unless it be to invoke heaven's choicest blessings upon your head—and to this effect will two devoted hearts ever pray!"

He glanced towards Ellen Kirkland as he thus spoke; and she immediately added in a low voice tremulous with emotions, "Never, dear Mary, shall there go up from my lips, night or morning, a prayer to heaven in which your name will not be included. You are the saviour of him I love: in delivering Leonard you have rescued me also from death!"

There was not an unmoistened eye around the sofa on which I lay; and my own tears flowed plenteously. In a few minutes a message was brought by one of the ushers of the court to the effect that Judge Baily would be pleased to say a word to me ere I took my departure. A suitable response was sent back; and feeling now much stronger, I sat up on the sofa to receive his lordship. The Judge entered the room in his official costume, just as he had descended from the bench; and as he advanced towards me, I endeavoured to rise in token of respect. But with benevolent look and manner, he bade me remain seated; and taking my hand, said with much feeling, "Young woman, it must have been not merely the strictest sense of duty, but also the noblest generosity of heart, that could have prompted you to risk your life by leaving a sick couch, ill as you are, to rescue a fellow-creature from the overwhelming weight of circumstantial evidence. It is one of the most extraordinary as well as the most touching incidents on record. Heaven will bless you for your goodness; and the world cannot fail to esteem you." Then turning towards Leonard Pereival, the Judge said, "Young man, I repeat here the congratulations which I just now offered when discharging you from custody. Most unfeignedly do I rejoice at this signal manifestation of your innocence. I have ordered that the money taken from you at the time of your arrest, and which is proved to have been the gift of Lady Harlesdon, shall be restored. Permit me to add a like sum from my own purse: it will help you to commence the world anew. My clerk has already received instructions to this effect."

The Judge then turned hastily away to avoid the acknowledgment of Leonard Percival's gratitude, and passed into an adjacent room.

Soon afterwards it was announced that the car-

riage was ready at the private entrance of the court; and I bade farewell to Leonard, Ellen Kirkland, and Mrs. Baker. But we did not separate without a cordial invitation being given by Mrs. Calder for them to visit me as often as they pleased at Merton House,—the good lady adding with a smile, "For it is my intention to keep our dear Mary with me as long as she can make herself happy beneath my roof."

I was now conducted forth to the carriage, which speedily drove away amidst the cheers of the crowd that had assembled to witness the departure. Immediately upon our arrival at Merton House again, I had to betake myself to bed and to the care of the kind-hearted old nurse, who was immensely delighted on hearing of the successful issue of my adventure at Derby. It was most probably the happiness which resulted therefrom that prevented me from experiencing a severe illness from the extraordinary fatigue and exhaustion I had endured: but the state of the mind invariably exercises a strong influence, either for good or for evil, over the body—and in this case it was fortunately in the favourable sense. Two or three days elapsed, however, before Dr. Scott or Mrs. Calder would suffer me to encounter any new source of excitement by devoting attention to the other affairs which had now resumed a paramount importance in my estimation. But as I recovered—rapidly regaining strength as well as good spirits—it was not long ere Dr. Scott gave me permission to occupy myself with those concerns to which I have alluded. Therefore, so soon as I was able to rise from my couch and sit up in an easy-chair by the fire, I obtained writing materials and penned a letter to Lady Harlesdon. Without entering into full details, I gave a rapid outline of all I had suffered—all the persecutions I had endured—and all the treacheries that had been practised against me; and I concluded by beseeching her ladyship to come and see me that I might give fuller explanations, as I should not feel easy till such an interview had taken place, and the doctor had declared that I must not think of leaving the house for the next week or ten days. This letter I sealed and addressed to Lady Harlesdon, Mrs. Calder kindly undertaking to send it by one of her men-servants to the Park, so that its delivery might be sure. With much anxiety and suspense did I await the return of the messenger; for I was fearful not only that the epistle might be intercepted by Lord Harlesdon, but also that the servant might hear things prejudicial to me at the Park.

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon when the servant was sent off: it was between two and three when he returned—and then Mrs. Calder came herself up to my chamber to tell me the result. She held my letter in her hand; and I at once saw that the seal was unbroken. Had it then been returned with disdain and contempt? Such was my first thought; and the anguish it produced was accompanied by the most painful suspense.

"Mary my dear child," said Mrs. Calder, "you must prepare for a disappointment. Lord and Lady Harlesdon have quitted the Park. They left it with their children and nearly all the servants the day before yesterday, with the intention of taking their departure immediately from England and proceeding to Italy."

"Oh, how unfortunate!" I exclaimed. "But this letter can be sent on to their town mansion——"

"It will not reach them," interrupted Mrs. Calder. "They left the Park with the intention of proceeding as rapidly as might be to Dover—thence to embark for the Continent. There can be no doubt that the sudden turn which Leonard Percival's trial took at Derby, and the remorseful confession of John Morley, terrified Lord Harlesdon lest the share he had in persecuting you should be brought to light and bring down public execration upon him. This is the only way to account for his abrupt, and indeed precipitate departure from England."

"My dear madam," I said, after a long pause, during which I deliberated profoundly, "it now becomes imperatively necessary that I should explain to you a certain circumstance which I have not as yet revealed. An odious calumny has been circulated concerning me——"

"It has already reached my ears," answered Mrs. Calder; "and I did not believe it. At all events I knew full well that you would be enabled to explain it; and it was not my intention to mention the circumstance in your hearing until you were fully and completely restored to health."

"Oh, my kind benefactress!" I exclaimed: "how different have you behaved from all others whose ears that same calumny reached!"

"Mary," answered Mrs. Calder, taking my hand and pressing it cordially, "I was too well convinced of your candour and your frankness not to have faith also in your innocence and purity. Besides, a young woman who would so nobly and so generously risk her life, as you did, in the performance of a duty towards a fellow-creature, was by no means likely to be the depraved and immoral girl that calumny represented. No, Mary—not for a single instant did I believe that tale: nor does a single individual beneath this roof."

"Thanks, ten thousand thanks, for this assurance!" I exclaimed, the tears of gratitude and joy raining down my cheeks. "But tell me, dear lady, when and how this calumny reached your ears."

"The day after the trial Captain Calder happened to meet Lord Miltown, with whom he is slightly acquainted; and in the course of conversation your name was mentioned. His lordship thereupon stated what he had heard. The Captain, who can swear a little when excited or annoyed, rapped out a tremendous oath, it appears, and declared that so far from believing it he only wished he had the originators of the calumny on the quarter-deck of a man-of-war, and he would give them each three dozen of a good rope's-end. I must further observe, my dear child, that the servant who just now took your letter over to Harlesdon Park, heard you most favourably — indeed kindly and enthusiastically spoken of by the domestics remaining in charge of the mansion; and they, it appears, do not for a moment believe that you ran away of your own accord, but have all along felt convinced you had been carried off. It must be therefore satisfactory for you to know that those persons who are best acquainted with you, spontaneously stand forward in your defence."

"Again I thank you, my kind benefactress, for

telling me all this," said I. "But it is not sufficient that my character should rest upon your own generous confidence, or upon the good opinion which my fellow-servants at Harlesdon Park have formed of me. Your treatment of the poor friendless orphan whom chance in her weary wanderings flung down at your gate, has been so Christian-like, so humane—I might even say so maternal—that it would be the basest ingratitude on my part to keep anything secret from you. I therefore now beg and beseech that you will read this letter which I had penned to Lady Harlesdon, but which has been brought back. I did not show it to you before it was despatched, because I was in hopes that it would have found Lady Harlesdon and brought her hither, and that after an interview with me she would of her own accord have assured you that my character is stainless and pure. In that case it would have been unnecessary for me to enter into any explanations relative to that *one* incident which has proved the origin of so much terrible calumny against me. But Lady Harlesdon has gone—the letter has not reached her—and I have no alternative but to request you to read it for my own complete vindication."

"If it contain a secret, my dear child, at all affecting your late noble mistress," said Mrs. Calder, "I do not for a moment wish to pry into it,—and that it *does* contain some secret of this nature, I more than half suspect. Indeed, I can partially guess it——"

"You, madam?" I exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes," responded Mrs. Calder: "for rumour has for a considerable time whisperingly coupled the names of Lady Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Clavering."

"Ah! then hesitate no longer," said I, "to read my letter."

Mrs. Calder now proceeded to comply with my request; and the following paragragh in the epistle which I had penned to Lady Harlesdon, conveyed a full explanation of the origin of the calumny levelled against me:—

"That your ladyship was grossly and scandalously imposed upon with regard to me, I do solemnly declare. It was *not* in the arms of Sir Aubrey Clavering that you saw me half-reclining on that memorable day. No, dear lady; it was none other than the Gipsy Queen—the woman that stole your child in London—who was dressed up to personate Sir Aubrey upon the occasion. His own apparel, his very horse, were lent for the purpose; and all this terrible treachery was a part of the understanding to which he had previously come with Lord Harlesdon concerning me. Can you not understand the motive? Alas, dear lady! it was another phase in that vengeance which his lordship has for months past been wreaking upon you, and all the details of which are so painfully known to me. Good heavens! did not your ladyship know me better than to suppose even for an instant that I was capable of such brazen immorality?"

Mrs. Calder was perfectly astounded on thus finding the key to the reading of that enigma whence the calumny concerning me had arisen; and she exclaimed, "Well indeed may Lord Harlesdon have deemed it prudent to fly precipitately from England and avoid the public execration that would follow an exposure of the vile conspiracies in which he has been a participator with regard to you! Without entering into any explanations relative to this secret of which you have just made me acquainted, I shall nevertheless be enabled to assure my husband, my son, and all who are interested in your welfare, that I have received the most positive and convincing proofs of the base falsehood of the calumny propagated concerning you."

"And will you do me another favour, Mrs. Calder?" I asked: "will you request your kind husband to write to Lord Miltown and to Dr. Vincent to the same purpose? and will you yourself write to Mrs. Hilton at the village which I have before named, assuring her of my innocence and requesting her to show your communication to Mr. Palmer, the clergyman of that place?—for I have already vowed that wherever the calumny has been circulated, thither must the contradiction be sent."

All that I asked was willingly done. The Captain wrote, as desired, to Lord Miltown and Dr. Vincent: but his letters remained without reply. Mrs. Calder's epistle to Mrs. Hilton was on the contrary answered by return of post—that lady declaring herself completely satisfied, and expressing her fervid regret at having been so misled with regard to me. She desired to be affectionately remembered to me, and promised to place Mrs. Calder's letter in the hands of the village clergyman.

I must now avail myself of this opportunity to observe that in the course of conversation a day or two after the trial scene at Derby, I had inquired whether the ——th regiment was still quartered there: for the reader will scarcely require to be informed that I was naturally anxious to know whether Eustace Quentin was near enough to Harlesdon Park to have been easily accessible to the odious calumny to which such frequent allusion has been made. To my joy I learnt that the regiment had suddenly been ordered away from Derby a fortnight back to some place in the north of Ireland; and thus I hoped that the evil report had not reached Mr. Quentin's knowledge. But then, might not Lady Harlesdon have written to him on the subject? Such had been my fear when during my wanderings I was tormented by all kinds of wretched thoughts: but now that my mind had assumed a healthier tone, my opinion changed on that point. For in the first place Lady Harlesdon was ignorant of the engagement subsisting between us, and therefore suspected not to what extent her cousin Eustace might be interested in me or my proceedings: and in the second place I knew that she was not of a malignant or vindictive character. Therefore, all things considered, I deemed it best to refrain from volunteering to Eustace any written explanation of a calumny which I now considered unlikely to have reached his ears at all. I was so fearful that were I to write to him on that or any other subject, it would seem like an overture on my part to break the compact which I myself had so earnestly stipulated, and which was so solemnly ratified between us.

Having recorded all these necessary little explanations, I must now return to the solemn subject of John Morley's fearful crime, of which he gave a full narrative to the Sheriff, in the presence of the Governor and Chaplain of the prison, on the day following his confession in the court of justice. The reader will recollect that on the memorable evening of Leonard Percival's examina-

tion before Lord Harlesdon, I overheard, when concealed behind the curtains in the library, Jacob Harper and John Morley making some appointment, but that I could not catch the when and the where. It now appeared that it was for half-past eleven that night in the field adjoining the lane where the post-chaise was to be in waiting for twelve. Morley, after drinking ale in the servants' hall, issued forth to meet the gamekeeper; and on arriving at the place of appointment, he found him already there. What then occurred must be described in Morley's own words:—

"On meeting Harper I asked him if he had got the money: namely, the fifty pounds which was to be my share of the hundred pound note given by Lord Harlesdon. He said that he had brought full change for the note, in small notes and in gold, in order that I might make my choice as to the kind of money I would have. He produced a canvass bag containing the notes and gold; and at that instant the moon burst forth in all its brilliancy—for it was previously very dark. I at once observed that as he turned the notes over in his hand, the hundred pound one given by Lord Harlesdon was along with all the others. I said, 'What a lot of money you have got, Jacob.'—He replied, 'And what a scurvy fellow you must be not to have waited till to-morrow for your fifty pounds. Did you think I should cheat you out of it?'—I answered that I did not suppose he would, but that as on a former occasion we had had some quarrelling about money matters, I thought it best to have a short reckoning now, that we might be the better friends. 'Besides,' I added, 'as I had to be in the lane and you had to go your rounds before you went to bed, there is no harm done in my wishing to have my money to-night.'—'Well, I was only joking,' returned Harper: 'I myself look pretty sharp after money matters, and if I had been cross at your conduct I should not have brought my bag to offer you choice of the change.'—While this conversation was going on, the devil was whispering in my ear. Fifty pounds only of what the bag contained was due to me, and the entire contents were over two hundred pounds. The temptation was greater than I could resist: I felt in my pocket, and my knife was there. I opened it inside the pocket, and suddenly drawing it forth, sent it deep down into the gamekeeper's heart. It was but a faint cry that came from his lips; but he sprang high up into the air, and dropped stone dead. I took from him everything of value he had about his person, and then rushed away from the scene of my crime. Leaping over the stile into the lane, I hurried along till I met the post-chaise for which I was waiting. An extraordinary degree of coolness now took possession of me: I felt a kind of desperation, amounting indeed to perfect indifference. I suppose I was thoroughly hardened. I walked down the lane with the hostler who had come with the post-chaise; and we captured Mary Price. She fainted; and when she came to herself again, she and I were in the carriage together. She made some observation about *murder;* and never shall I forget the shocking feelings that rose up within me. It seemed as if she read in my face the secret of my soul. That was indeed a terrible moment for me! I took her in the chaise to the place of destination, about twelve or thirteen miles from the Park;* and having left her there, hastened back by the same conveyance to the lane whence we had started. There I dismissed the chaise, and went as quickly as possible to Farmer Jones's. It was then three o'clock in the morning, and I made some excuse for knocking the house up at such an hour. I have now no more to say—except that I do sincerely hope Leonard Percival will forgive me for having suffered him, though innocent, to bear the weight of this foul crime; and I declare that I do not for a moment repent having admitted that I am the real author of it, inasmuch as the evidence of Mary Price must have inevitably brought it home to me."

As a matter of course, while making his confession, Morley was compelled to mix up the names of Lord Harlesdon and Sir Aubrey Clavering with the details of each progressive step that had led him to the fatal deed; but those to whom the confession was made—with the usual official regard for the reputation of aristocratic or wealthy personages—suppressed as much as they could of these parts of Morley's revelations, so that the bare history of the murder itself was all that found its way into the newspapers.

On being formally placed upon his trial before Judge Baily, in the same dock where Leonard Percival had stood three days previously, John Morley pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to death in due form. On being conveyed back to his dungeon, he was visited by his mother—Mrs. Ferguson, as she chose to call herself; and from the statement which appeared in the public journals, the unfortunate woman was well nigh distracted during the interview. Ah! little did she think when so pitilessly lending herself to the designs of those who meditated my ruin,—little did she think, I say, when presiding over my destinies at the White Cottage,—that such a horrible scene of misery was already in embryo for herself! But notwithstanding all she had done to me, I could not help pitying her from the very depths of my soul, as I read in the newspapers the account of that distressing interview which she had with her doomed son.

But let me hasten and bring to a conclusion this melancholy episode in my history. Leonard Percival visited John Morley in prison, and unfeignedly assured him of his forgiveness. The condemned man was no doubt deeply penitent: the scene in the court, which had moved him with so powerful an impulse to confess his guilt, had wrought a complete change in him; and from that instant when he fell upon his knees before the Judge to confess his guilt, until the final moment when he stood upon the drop with the halter round his neck, his conduct was most seemly and repentant. In this frame of mind was he launched into eternity, in the presence of an immense concourse of people, assembled to witness that awful deed of public strangulation.

A month after the trial Leonard Percival became the husband of Ellen Kirkland. The young couple had three hundred pounds to begin the world with—one hundred received from Lady Harlesdon, another

* The reader will therefore perceive that on my escape from the White Cottage, I had at first wandered several miles in the wrong direction, and had afterwards got by some circuitous route into the road leading in the direction of Harlesdon Park and whence there was a branch that turned off towards Derby.

hundred so generously presented by the Judge, and a third hundred bestowed with equal kindness by the warm-hearted Captain Calder. This was not all the good fortune which now attended Mr. Percival. The old proverb says that "it never rains but it pours;" and as he had experienced a shower of misfortunes so he was now destined to receive a torrent of bounties. The reader will remember that the farm which his deceased father had been compelled to give up, belonged to a gentleman at Derby; and it happened to be unlet at the very period of which I am now writing,—the tenant who had succeeded old Mr. Percival, having recently died. The gentleman who was the owner of the farm, was much interested by the narrative of Leonard's misfortunes as well as by the romantic circumstances attending the development of his innocence. He sent for the young man and offered him the farm. Leonard was at first overjoyed: but on reflection he found that three hundred pounds were not sufficient capital to enable him to take it. The liberality of the owner was however displayed in the kindest manner; and immediately after their marriage, Leonard and Ellen were enabled to enter upon the occupation of the land. The reader may rest assured that old Mrs. Baker did not separate from them when they were installed in the comfortable homestead to which the farm was attached.

CHAPTER XLI.

MY FOURTH PLACE.

I HAD remained five weeks at Merton House, and it was now the close of February. On the complete restoration of my health—when the good old nurse was dismissed and Dr. Scott's professional visits were no longer necessary—I was assigned to the care of the housekeeper, a kind-hearted woman named Hutchinson; and I took my meals with her in her own room. On several occasions I represented to her that I should look out for a new situation as nursery-maid: but Mrs. Hutchinson invariably said, "Do not be in a hurry, my dear Mary: we all like you too well to part with you; and Mrs. Calder would be quite grieved if you were to mention such a thing."

At length I assured Mrs. Hutchinson that I could not possibly live in idleness upon the bounty of this amiable family, as it would not only be wrong, but also totally inconsistent with my ideas of propriety.

"Well, Mary," Mrs. Hutchinson replied, "leave the matter in my hands, and I will see what Mrs. Calder's views are concerning you. Remember, you cannot do altogether just as you please, but are bound to consult your friends and those who wish you well as to your future proceedings. Therefore, let the affair rest for the moment, and I will see about it in due course."

"Pray do, my dear Mrs. Hutchinson," was my answer on this occasion: but several more days passed, and the worthy housekeeper omitted to speak to Mrs. Calder on the subject.

I must here observe that when Leonard and Ellen were married and established at the farm, they offered me a home beneath their roof: they even begged and implored that if I left Merton House I would go and live with them,—assuring me that I should be treated as a very dear sister. But this was an offer I could not possibly accept. I knew full well they would not permit me to assist in any menial capacity in their household; and not for worlds would I have become a burden to them. Besides, I was resolved not to eat the bread of indolence; and if I were impatient of my position beneath the roof of a rich family's mansion, much more dissatisfied should I have been with myself, if encroaching upon the narrow means of those who had just commenced the career of married life.

It was six weeks after my arrival at Merton House that I one day had an opportunity of speaking to Mrs. Calder upon the topic which I saw very plainly Mrs. Hutchinson would not broach for me.

"I admire your spirit, my dear girl," answered the worthy lady, "in not choosing to eat the bread of dependence; and I should be wrong to discourage a feeling so highly creditable to yourself. At the same time I am by no means prepared to part with you—nor is there any necessity that I can see for you to leave Merton House. We all like you here; and we all wish to keep you. Now, the fact is that poor old Mrs. Hutchinson has got a great deal to do—more than she can manage; and I have for some time past—before you came here indeed—thought of giving her an assistant. What say you?"

"Mrs. Calder," I answered, "I never can find terms strong enough to express the feeling of gratitude which I experience for all you have done for me; and therefore, believe me that I do not mean to be ungrateful when I say that you have really no situation at all to offer me beneath your roof. Mrs. Hutchinson does not need any assistance. I have often endeavoured to take some of her duties off her hands; but she would not permit me. Ah! dear lady, I know full well that, with characteristic generosity, you are devising a plan to overcome my scruples by *inventing* the situation for me to fill: but I should not be worthy of your good opinion if I took advantage of your exceeding benevolence. Do, dear lady, suffer me to look out for a situation: it shall be somewhere in the neighbourhood that I may have the pleasure of paying you my respects from time to time—for it would grieve me indeed to separate from you altogether."

"You are a good and an excellent girl," answered Mrs. Calder, affectionately tapping my cheek; "and it would be a sin in me to assert my own selfish desire over your honest purpose. It is true, Mary, that what I just now said was a device to keep you: but, as I also observed, every one likes you here. The Captain will be in a dreadful rage when he learns that you intend to leave us; and Edward, who is a generous-hearted youth—though I should scarcely say so of my own son—has conceived the greatest interest in your behalf. But if your mind is made up I shall not urge any farther remonstrance, but will even assist you to procure a comfortable place. And mind, there is one thing I must insist upon—that you do not leave us until you enter upon a situation where you are certain to be comfortable."

Here the conversation ended; and on the following day, while looking over the columns of a Derby paper, I was struck by this advertisement:—

WANTED, at a ladies' school, a young person as needlewoman, to take charge of the younger boarders' clothes, mend and keep them in repair, and make herself generally useful. She must be of good manners, genteel appearance, of Church of England principles, and not more than twenty or twenty-one; accustomed to children, and with unexceptionable references. Apply at Miss Nibkins' Establishment, Montpellier House, Derby.

This advertisement seemed to offer a situation eligible enough for me. I showed it to Mrs. Calder: but all she knew of Miss Nibkins was that she had a very large school and was considered to be a respectable person. The worthy lady, however, questioned whether I should like the manifold and laborious duties of a seminary: but I expressed my desire to look after the place, and she offered no farther objection. The reader may possibly fancy that I was somewhat in a hurry to quit Merton House; and to tell the truth, I was so—not only because I was anxious to eat the bread of industry once more, but likewise because it was impossible for me to close my eyes to the fact that I had become the object of increasing attention and interest on the part of Mr. Edward Calder. This young gentleman, as I have previously stated, was about three-and-twenty years of age, and was considered to be (as he certainly was) very good-looking. He had chesnut hair, blue eyes, a rather pale countenance, a slender figure, and a very genteel appearance. He was both intelligent and amiable: the expression of his features indicated high mental qualifications, together with frankness, candour, and generosity of disposition. His health having been delicate until within the last few years, he had been brought up to no profession; but had resided at home altogether, after leaving Rugby School, where he was educated. His health had latterly become re-established, and had ceased to give his parents any uneasiness: but as he was their only child, and they were very well off, so that they would be enabled to leave him a fortune, they still kept him at home;—and affectionate as they were towards him, equally dutiful was he in return.

After my convalescence, Mr. and Mrs. Calder would frequently have me for an hour or two in the parlour with them of an evening; and I soon perceived that Mr. Edward regarded me with an interest which gradually filled me with uneasiness and gave me pain. Often, too, would he come up into Mrs. Hutchinson's sitting-room and remain there to converse—a proceeding which he might adopt without impropriety, as she had been in the family ever since he was a child. On those occasions he treated me with a kindness almost amounting to a display of affection: and yet his manner was ever so perfectly respectful and gentlemanly that it was impossible even for a single moment to believe that he entertained any dishonourable intentions. At length his demeanour towards me grew more marked and unmistakeable—especially if ever we happened to be left alone together for a few minutes, as was sometimes the case both in the parlour down stairs and in the housekeeper's room. On several occasions, when the weather was very fine, I had walked in the garden in the rear of the house; and he had sometimes joined me. It is true that he merely stopped and held me in conversation for a few minutes; but by his look and his manner I could not help perceiving that he experienced towards me a feeling more tender than mere friendship. I was pained and uneasy, therefore, on his account; because, unless of his own accord he afforded me an opportunity for explanation, I could not possibly give him to understand that my own affections were elsewhere engaged. The reader can now comprehend why I was so exceedingly anxious to quit Merton House with as little delay as possible, and why I caught at the very first opportunity which seemed to present itself for obtaining a situation.

Having made up my mind to apply at Montpellier House, I took a place in the coach which passed by every day at noon for Derby, and soon after one o'clock entered that town. I had no difficulty in obtaining a guide from the coach-office to Miss Nibkins' establishment, which was situated on the outskirts. The house itself was very extensive—built with dingy red brick—straggling—and somewhat monastic in appearance. There was a garden in front, and a large play-ground in the rear; and in the summer time I had no doubt that the situation would be pleasant and agreeable enough. On ringing at the bell of the iron gate in the railings fencing the front garden, a young woman of somewhat slovenly appearance hurried forth from the front-door; and tripping along the gravel-walk, came with a key to open the gate. I asked if Miss Nibkins were at home; and the young woman, who had the appearance of being the housemaid, answered in the affirmative: then, with a sudden peculiarity of look and manner, she said in a quick voice, "Are you come about the place?"

"Yes," was my reply.

"Oh!" she answered very drily, "I hope you will like it then."

I made no observation to encourage her to proceed: for I saw at a glance that she had a whole budget of tittle-tattle pent up and to which she was longing to give utterance: but I never was prone to gossiping myself, and therefore was not likely to provoke it in others.

"Well, I should advise you to think twice before you come here," continued the young woman, fumbling with the key in the gate as if it would not immediately open. "The place is horrid. Miss Nibkins is a skinflint—as mean as a miser—and everybody is half-starved. I hope you ha'n't got a very good appetite, for your own sake—that's all!"

"I will see Miss Nibkins in any case, if you please," was my answer, given civilly of course, but in a way to show that I would rather judge for myself from the lady's appearance and so forth, than yield to prejudice at the outset.

The young woman gave a toss of the head, as much as to imply that I was a fool for not taking her advice and that she was a fool also for having thrown it away. She however opened the gate, and I was conducted into Montpellier House, where I was told to sit down in a dirty-looking hall while the servant went to inform Miss Nibkins that a young person had come after the place. In a few minutes a tall thin lady, in a soiled silk gown and a somewhat dingy cap, slowly descended the stairs and bade me follow her into a room which she entered on the ground-floor. This was a parlour tolerably well furnished, but looking very much as if it would be benefitted by a more intimate acquaintance with a carpet-broom and bees-wax. but I occupied

myself much less with the appearance of the place, than with that of Miss Nibkins herself; and this latter I shall endeavour to describe to the best of my ability.

I have already said that she was tall and thin: to descend more to particulars, I may observe that she was absolutely scraggy. She walked as upright as a dart, and sat equally upright in her chair; so that if her personal appearance were more imposing, there would have been something stately in her demeanour and her gait: but as it was, this stiffness and starchness on her part, associated with her long scraggy neck, thin wrinkled countenance, and sharp angular features, could only be described as old maidish primness. Then, with her cold look and her thin lips which scarcely moved as she spoke, she gave one the idea of an animated mummy. Her age was not very easy to guess at—for she wore a false front: but I calculated it at about forty. Her look was not merely prim, but also sanctimoniously demure; and it immediately struck me that she was one of those persons who make religious observances a source of self-mortification. Indeed, as I gazed upon her, I wondered within myself whether this serious and even severe-looking lady *could* possibly smile. I was agreeably surprised, however, when in a very mild voice that was most melancholy in its cadence, she began to question me.

"So you are come after the place which you have seen advertised in the Derby newspaper?"

I answered that I had. She then inquired my age; and I told her that I was a little past eighteen.

"Where did you live last? or where are you living now?" she inquired.

"I last lived as a servant at Lady Harlesdon's," was my response; and I immediately beheld a sort of brightening-up on that rigid parchment-like countenance, as if the mere mention of an aristocratic name at once shed a benign influence upon Miss Nibkins' soul. "But I am now staying at Merton House. Perhaps you know it, ma'am—Mrs. Calder's."

"Then what is your name?" she asked somewhat hastily, a suspicion of who I was having evidently struck her.

I gave the proper answer, and somewhat anxiously awaited its effect.

"I thought so the instant you mentioned Merton House. And you are indeed the young creature who behaved so well some six weeks back on the occasion of that poor man's trial?"

I answered that I was the person alluded to; and Miss Nibkins very deliberately took out a pair of large horn spectacles, which with an equally measured precision she adjusted on her thin nose; —and then through the large circular glasses she surveyed me with a fixed attention.

"I suppose, then, that Lady Harlesdon and Mrs. Calder will both give you a character?" she at length said, taking off her spectacles, returning them to the case, and then putting the case itself back into her reticule; whence she now drew forth a pair of worsted mittens which she drew over her long lanky hands.

"Her ladyship has gone abroad," was my answer; "but Mrs. Calder will cheerfully give you every requisite information concerning me."

"Then I will write to Mrs. Calder in the course of the day," rejoined Miss Nibkins. "You understand from the advertisement the duties you will have to undertake? They may be made light and agreeable enough in the hands of a willing person: but unfortunately, in this world of sorrow and of sin, there is so much discontent that the easiest avocations become changed by our own perverse natures into the heaviest."

I assured Miss Nibkins that, according to the specifications of her advertisement, I did not fear the duties of the place, but hoped I should be enabled to give satisfaction.

"You speak both modestly and sensibly," observed the lady; "and this is already a recommendation in your favour, after the sad experiences of servants' waywardness which I have known. Modesty in this world is near akin to humility; and humility teaches us to set but a small value upon our own qualifications. Is this your disposition, young woman?"

I answered that I hoped and trusted it was.

"Then, in that case," rejoined Miss Nibkins, "I presume that six pounds a year will suffice?"

The pecuniary crisis to which the lady's moral homily had led her, was so unexpected by me, and also struck me as having an effect so ridiculous at the moment, that I could scarcely help laughing; and Miss Nibkins once more drew forth her great horn spectacles, adjusted them upon her nose, and looked at me very hard, as if she had seen my risible muscles moving. I however hastened to assure her that I was satisfied with her offer: for I did not mean to allow any pecuniary consideration to stand in the way of an arrangement,—my anxiety to obtain the place immediately, being already explained to the reader.

"I am glad to see, young woman," said Miss Nibkins, again taking off her spectacles and restoring them to her reticule, "that you are of a contented disposition. For my part, whatever worldly goods I possess, and whatever emoluments I derive from my industry, are not merely viewed by me with profound thankfulness, but at the same time fill me with the melancholy thought that they are far more than I deserve. Of course you are of Church of England principles?"

I answered that I had been so brought up; and Miss Nibkins expressed her satisfaction,—at the same time giving me the very liberal assurance that if I had not been she could not for a moment have thought of receiving me into her service. I then moved towards the door; and as I was about to quit the room she called me back, saying, "The servant who let you in is about to leave. She is a very deceitful, artful, stiff-necked, and designing young woman—without thankfulness and without principle—neglecting her devotions, and making away with the broken victuals. I hope therefore that you will not encourage her to gossip as you leave the house."

I gave what I considered to be a proper answer, and went away. The dirty-looking housemaid who had been thus denounced by her mistress, accompanied me as far as the gate; and I noticed as I turned to wish her "good morning," the tall prim form of Miss Nibkins standing at the parlour-window, evidently to watch our proceedings. It even struck me that I could distinguish her great horn spectacles upon her nose. But she assuredly had no reason to think that I gossipped with her servant: for I at once hurried away. Proceeding to

the coach-office, I found that a vehicle was about to leave that would pass by Merton House; and I accordingly returned thither without delay. I told Mrs. Calder that I had arranged with Miss Nibkins, who would write to her for my character; and the worthy lady assured me that since I was satisfied with the place it should not be her fault if I did not obtain it.

On the following day I was walking in the garden at the back of the house, when on entering a shrubbery formed of dense evergreens at the bottom of the enclosure, I found myself face to face with Mr. Edward Calder. He looked pale and agitated; and I could not help at once being struck by the peculiarity of his manner.

"Miss Price," he said—for thus had he always been accustomed to address me,—"I wish to speak to you. I have purposely sought you here. Pray do not be frightened! You know I am incapable of treating you with disrespect: but do give me a hearing. I understand you are about to leave—that you are going back to menial service——Heavens, how unfit is this for *you!*"

The sudden appearance of Mr. Edward, followed so immediately by these rapidly-uttered and excited words, threw me into such bewilderment and confusion that I knew not what to do or how to answer: but he saw that I was both alarmed and chagrined—and hence his endeavour to tranquillize me.

"Hear me, I say," he continued; "and be not afraid. Not for worlds would I injure you!—and of the sincerity of the regard which I entertain towards you I am about to give the best, the only proof that one in my situation can. Miss Price, my parents love me too well to thwart my inclinations or stamp my unhappiness. They are moreover much prepossessed in your favour, and consider you to be in manners and feeling superior to your birth. For my part, I cannot bear the idea of your leaving us: the thought has made me understand all that I experi-

ence towards you. Say, then, will you accept my hand?—and this moment will I go to my parents—tell them what I have said—what I have done—and demand their assent!"

"Mr. Calder," I answered, all my self-possession now returning, "to the end of my days shall I remember with infinite gratitude the kindness I have experienced at Merton House; and it were ridiculous affectation on my part to declare that I am not flattered by the honour you have done me in this generous proposal. But I am engaged to another!"

The young man staggered back pale as death; and a sound like a moan of bitter anguish came from his lips. I pitied him—deeply, sincerely pitied him; and it rent my heart to witness that unmistakable evidence of a bitter disappointment. He leant against a tree for a few moments, and gazed upon me in speechless despair. I could not endure the sight; and with tears trickling down my cheeks, I said, "For heaven's sake, exercise a proper command over your feelings, Mr. Calder. And now forgive me if I leave you abruptly!"

"One moment, Mary—Miss Price!" he exclaimed, springing after me as I was turning away: "but one word, I implore you!"—and he caught me by the hand.

"Remember what I have told you, Mr. Calder," said I, gently but firmly disengaging that hand: "I am pledged to another!"

"Oh! pardon me—I beseech you to forgive me if I dared touch the hand which is to be bestowed upon that other!"—and there was something like bitterness in his voice: but the next instant, evidently perceiving that he had given vent to a feeling which was unworthy of him, and totally unmerited by myself, he said with a look and tone of melancholy contrition, "Yes, I ask your pardon—I beseech you to forgive me. But tell me—and be not offended that I ask the question—for you know not how immensely all my life's whole happiness is threatened by what is now passing—tell me, I say, is your heart given where your troth is also pledged?"

"It is, sir," I answered—and then hurried away: but at the moment I was issuing from the shrubbery a sound which was evidently that of an anguished sob reached my ears. I sped up to my own chamber; and sitting down, gave way to the sorrowful reflections which this scene was but too well calculated to excite: for I could not help pitying that young gentleman who from the very first instant I entered the house had shown me so much amiable sympathy, and who had all along treated me, not as a pauper-interloper, but with a most respectful demeanour. Nevertheless, while I thus pitied him, I did not for a single moment prove faithless to the memory of Eustace Quentin. No—that was impossible!

Three days elapsed ere I removed from Merton House to Miss Nibkins' establishment; and during this interval I did not once see Edward Calder. I principally kept my own room; but when invited down stairs to the parlour, found that he had gone out on some pretext. How different was *his* delicate and honourable behaviour from what that of Sir Aubrey Clavering had been! On the morning of my departure he was with his father and mother when I entered the parlour to bid farewell and express all I felt for the generous kindness I had received beneath their roof; and though the unhappy young man evidently struggled hard to subdue his feelings, yet I could not help reading in his looks how much he suffered.

CHAPTER XLII.

MISS NIBKINS' ESTABLISHMENT.

I MUST candidly confess it was not without some misgivings that I entered my new place: for as the reader may suppose, I had not been particularly prepossessed in Miss Nibkins' favour; and as she had appeared alarmed lest I should gossip with her housemaid, it struck me that the latter might have spoken but too truly when giving me her opinion at the gate. However, it was imperative that I should leave Merton House; and under such circumstances I should have accepted even a less attractive place than that afforded me at Miss Nibkins' establishment.

I have already said that Montpellier House was a spacious one; and so it well needed to be—for it had to contain sixty boarders, five teachers, and six servants. It was divided, so far as the boarders were concerned, into two departments, ostentatiously denominated the Upper Division and the Lower Division; and between the two the number of scholars was pretty evenly divided. The Upper Division consisted of young ladies of above ten years old,—some of whom were even sixteen or seventeen: while the Lower Division consisted of children whose ages averaged from six to ten. There were two school-rooms—one for each division; and the two wings of Montpellier House were similarly allotted as dormitories. The advertisement had given me a tolerably fair insight into the nature of the duties which I was expected to perform: but it assuredly had not enlightened me with equal clearness as to the extent of those duties. For though taking charge of the boarders' clothes, as well as mending and keeping the youngest girls' garments in repair, were terms explicit enough, I found that the additional clause of "making myself generally useful" was to comprehend services so multifarious that it would scarcely be possible to enumerate them.

Yet I will endeavour to give a succinct outline of the principal duties entrusted to me. I had to take charge of the clothes of the thirty little children forming the Lower Division—to darn stockings, mend holes, sew on buttons and strings, and even to patch up veritable rags into wearable garments. For be it understood that though Miss Nibkins' was not a cheap school, she nevertheless gratuitously volunteered to practise the utmost economy in respect to the pupils' wearing apparel. The contents of many of the little children's boxes were positively disgraceful; and articles of clothing which should have been consigned to the rag-bag, were actually made to serve as their Sunday's dresses. The reader may therefore guess what their every-day things were. I soon found that to keep such a mass of tatters in proper repair would not only consume a great deal of time, but likewise absorb countless yards of tape, papers of buttons, and pieces of linen and calico; so that when I sat down to work I could not help thinking of the Magician in the Arabian tale who went about crying "New lamps for old;" and I wished that some equally eccentric necromancer would pass by Miss Nibkins' establishment offering

to exchange new garments for old. But the needlework would not have vexed me if I had been properly supplied with the adequate materials to keep the children's clothes in repair. Miss Nibkins, however, seemed to fancy that *something* could be made out of *nothing:* for when I applied to her for tapes, buttons, and pieces to patch with, I had these articles doled out with a niggardness that in its sordid meanness corresponded but too well with the object for which the things were required.

Every morning I had to wash and dress these thirty children: every afternoon, at one o'clock, I had to pass the whole tribe in review again, so that they might sit down to dinner with clean faces and hands;—and every evening at seven o'clock I had to undress and put them all to bed. Of a Saturday night there was a "grand wash" of the whole thirty in the laundry: but Miss Nibkins made it a rule to enter every five minutes in order to assure herself that I was not extravagant with the mottled soap. If any of these little darlings were ill, I had to attend upon them, give them their medicine, force gruel down their throats, and perform the duties of nurse as well as of needlewoman and laundry-maid. Then I had to cut all their bread-and-butter for breakfast and tea, and likewise to make their milk-and-water. But it was a very difficult thing to make about half-a-pound of butter cover sixty slices of bread at a meal, each girl being allowed two slices; and notwithstanding all the scraping, and all the re-scraping from the first slices that were prepared in order to obtain enough butter for the last fifteen or twenty, it would have been a task to defy a Hercules or puzzle a Conjuror. However, the rule of Miss Nibkins' establishment was "So much butter to so much bread;" and I was compelled to do my best. Then, as for the milk-and-water, it was equally difficult to make one quart of milk give anything like a respectable colouring to two gallons of hot water—especially as the milk was supplied by contract at twopence a quart, and therefore was well watered by the dairyman before delivered at the school. As for sugar, *that* was a luxury unknown in the school-room. But the preparation of the breakfast and tea with such scanty materials, was not my only difficulty: the worst of it was I was bound to make the little girls contented with what they had——for Miss Nibkins held me answerable for what she called "the discipline of the table" on those occasions. That is to say, if she heard any of the children cry, it was to be considered my fault. But heavens! how could the poor little things help crying, when few of them had enough to eat, and most of them were too young to understand why they were not allowed more? It was very painful to me: and often and often did I go without my own meals in order to give them my share. For when I say *my share,* I must observe that as I took my breakfast and tea in the school-room of the Lower Division, I was limited in quantity (both of "sky-blue," as the milk-and-water was called, and "bread-and-scrape," as the bread-and-butter was denominated) as well as those over whom I presided.

In addition to the duties already enumerated, I had to keep the thirty girls' hair properly trimmed, and their nails cut; and I quite dreaded those mornings when these ceremonies were to be performed. Everybody who knows anything at all about children, is well aware what an awful aversion the little creatures have to these terrific ordeals. I may here observe that it was Miss Nibkins' positive orders they should always be washed in cold water (save on the Saturday-nights) and with common mottled soap. The reader will recollect it was still winter, being only the beginning of March, and the weather was terribly cold: therefore the process of washing thirty children, with blue faces and purple hands and arms, in the ice-chill water was anything but agreeable. It was in fact thirty consecutive variations of crying; and if by accident any of the mottled soap got into their eyes the squalling was perfectly horrific.

Thank heaven, I had nothing to do with the dinner arrangements, either in preparing the meal or presiding at it: the cook did the former, and one of the teachers occupied the head of the table in the Lower Division school-room. But I saw enough of those culinary preparations to fill me with disgust. By Miss Nibkins' especial orders the meat was always sent up in a half raw state, whether boiled or roasted, so that the children might not eat too much—or rather, in plainer English, that their little stomachs might be turned against it. It was perfectly loathsome to see, for instance, a great leg of salt pork, weighing perhaps twenty pounds, so under-done that the gravy looked like blood: and no wonder was it that such a joint, although served up for thirty children and the teacher, would sometimes last three or four days, until at length in very shame it was put into the oven and warmed up ere doing duty for the final occasion. The only puddings allowed were bread, suet, treacle, and peas-pudding. The bread puddings were a compound sufficient to make a workhouse pauper turn sick. All the dirty stale nibbled bits of bread were carefully collected after every meal, and put into a large earthenware pan in the pantry, until there was a sufficiency to form a pudding; and this treat was regularly supplied once a week. When the school-rooms had been swept I have actually seen Miss Nibkins put on her great horn spectacles and look over the contents of the dust-pans to ascertain whether there were any pieces of bread amongst the dirt; and when she was fortunate enough to detect any, she invariable found a salve for her conscience and an excuse for her economy, in the maxim that "wilful waste makes woful want." Then, as for the suet-puddings, a similar process was adopted,—a pan being kept in which all the morsels of fat left from the different joints--no matter whether of mutton, beef, or boiled pork—were duly collected; and being coarsely cut up—not chopped—these racy bits served to enrich the cannon-ball kind of substance by courtesy denominated "suet-pudding." Now and then, when Miss Nibkins was in a generous mood, or on some favoured girl's birthday, it was ostentatiously announced that the young ladies in both school-rooms would be regaled with a treat; and this splendid treat consisted of a few currants sprinkled at lamentably wide intervals throughout the suet-puddings. As a general rule, the cook was ordered never to let the puddings boil too much, for fear the girls should have their appetites too easily satisfied—because the more under-done the pudding, the heavier it lay upon the stomach and the farther in consequence did it go. Besides, it was cheaper to make a jorum of salts and senna, and give the girls a dose round once a week so as to keep them in health, than to allow them good wholesome food every day. But while I am speaking of the dinners,

I must not forget to observe that Friday was called "meat-pie day" and Saturday "hashed-mutton day." The leavings of the week were collected from all the plates and dishes, and half of this aggregated garbage was made into pies for the Friday, and the other portion served up in the shape of a hash for the Saturday. These messes were the most loathsome and disgusting it is possible to conceive; and hungry—indeed, half-famished as the children were—their little hearts would heave against the filth thus served up.

The descriptions which I have given apply not only to the Junior Division, of which I had the care, but also to the Upper Division; but whereas the thirty little girls in the former had water to drink at dinner-time, the thirty senior girls of the higher department were allowed table-beer. This table-beer was the same that the servants had to drink; and such stuff as it was!—tasting as sour as vinegar-and-water, and looking as if mixed up with a thick mud! Nevertheless Miss Nibkins was so fearful lest the beer should go too quick that she kept the key of the tap herself, and always superintended the drawing of it. She however took very good care not to drink it herself: she always had a beverage which she made for her own special use, and which for a long time I understood to be toast-and-water, until one day the jug containing it got upset, when the odour of brandy proved too unmistakable not to be at once recognized.

Miss Nibkins presided in person, with her great horn spectacles on her nose, at the table of the young ladies of the Upper Division; and there also the four principal teachers took their meals. But there was no extra dish for their use: they all had to eat of the same dishes that were served out around the board. Miss Nibkins however always complained of a weak stomach, and vowed "that she could only pick a bit,"—for the very excellent reason that at noon she had a nice mutton-chop served up in her private parlour for her own special behoof; and in the evening when the young ladies and teachers were all in bed, she would have some little luxury for her supper.

But how was it that Miss Nibkins could get any teachers to stay with her at all? Because she got hold of poor friendless creatures who were glad to obtain an asylum and a mouthful of food. Their salaries were scarcely better than those of the household-servants: nor were they treated with any higher distinction by Miss Nibkins. Without any positively overt demonstration of cruelty, she practiced towards them a myriad little tyrannies which not only kept them incessantly alive to the dependence of their positions, but must have been a process killing them by inches. It was the difference between pricking a victim with a thousand needles day after day, and giving one mortal stab in the heart at once. I have seen those poor teachers crying bitterly when they fancied themselves unobserved: unintentionally I have surprised them at times sobbing as if their hearts would break. I do not even know that I ever saw the famished little children weeping more poignantly for hunger, than those grown-up women for the cruelty of their employer. Worked like slaves, and yet expected always to be in good health and cheerful—paid like paupers, and yet bound to maintain a respectable exterior—subjected to an incessant series of the most goading humiliations, and yet always supposed to have their minds clear for the duties of instruction,—these poor unhappy creatures led an existence which makes me shudder when I look back upon it. Oh! the fearful tyrannies which are perpetrated in too many of those seminaries which are paraded to the world as respectable establishments—aye, and which maintain their character as such!

But before I resume the thread of my story, let me give the reader a little farther insight into the character of Miss Nibkins. She was what the world calls a pious woman: but her religion was nothing more than a demure sanctimoniousness, outwardly assumed, and serving as a mask for the naturally cold calculating selfishness of her disposition. One would think that she must have been a disappointed old maid: for she seemed to have an austere dislike to everything savouring of mirth on the part of grown-up people; and it was even with a jaundiced eye that she gazed upon the sports of the little children in the play-ground. I never knew a person who had so completely the knack of making joyful things the means of sadness. If she now and then gave the children an extra half-holiday, it was upon the condition that they would devote at least an hour of it to learn a collect or a few verses of a psalm. She said grace at table, not in a tone of thankfulness, but with the awful look and lugubrious voice of deep lamentation: but I must confess that there was really little in the meals served up to be thankful for. Her piety was entirely of her own invention: for every painful or unpleasant little incident that might occur to herself or others, she expatiated upon as a punishment for sins committed—and anything that was agreeable or pleasant, set her grieving at the thought that it was more than she deserved. She beheld everything through a glass darkly,—seeing naught but the weeds of the earth and none of the flowers, and always representing the world as one of sin and sorrow.

Such was the character of Miss Nibkins; and the reader will not require to be informed that she was not the most agreeable person in the world to have as a mistress. I have already said that in speech she was mild and melancholy; and I must now add that in the presence of the parents or the relations of any of her pupils, she could become marvellously affable, kind, and indulgent. I will give an example of this pliability of humour on her part. One day the parlour-bell rang twice—which was a signal that I was wanted. I accordingly hastened in obedience to the summons; and on entering the parlour found Miss Nibkins seated with two ladies. One was very old, with a shrivelled-up face, and a mouth that had all fallen in through the total loss of the teeth. The other was about thirty, displaying a round fat face—a long nose crimson with the cold or with something else—and great thick lips of a purply colour. She was dressed out in a most extravagant fashion; and though she had the air of a washerwoman bedizened in borrowed raiment, she nevertheless was full of affectations, and was most lack-a-daisical in her demeanour, her attitudes, and her speech. This lady was a Mrs. Nubley—the wife of a cheesemonger in Derby; and the old lady was her mother. She had now come to see her two daughters, Miss Pamela and Miss Arabella Nubley, who were pursuing their education in the Lower Division of Miss Nibkins' establishment. It was mid-day when the two ladies thus called; and a decanter of wine (it was Cape Madeira at one shilling and threepence

the bottle) with a plate of cakes had been brought up on a tray.

"Mary," said Miss Nibkins, in the mildest tone possible, as if she were asking me a great favour instead of issuing an order, "go and fetch in those dear girls Pamela and Arabella. But Mary, don't tell them that their mamma and grandmamma are come to see them: it will give them such a surprise, the dear sweet creatures!" then as I was about to leave the room, Miss Nibkins suddenly darted to the door with a velocity that was surprising for a lady of her prim demeanour and staid walk; and clutching me by the shoulder as I crossed the threshold, she said in a hurried whisper, "Wash their faces and put them on clean pinafores."

I accordingly hastened to the school-room, where I found Miss Pamela (the elder of the two "dear sweet little creatures") amusing herself by drawing horrible faces with the ink on her hands and arms; and Miss Arabella (the younger) fighting a battle with another little girl of about her own age. I however hurried the two Misses Nubley, whose ages were respectively seven and nine, up-stairs to the dormitory; and what with the unsparing use of the mottled soap, the appliance of the hair-brush and comb, and the adjuncts of a couple of clean pinafores, I made them quite presentable. Then I conducted them down stairs to the parlour, and was rewarded with an approving look from Miss Nibkins for the manner in which I had polished them up for the occasion.

I was turning to leave the room when Mrs. Nubley exclaimed, "And so, my dear, you are the Mary Price which made such a himmense sensation some weeks ago in Darby? Your kind missus has been telling us everythink about you——"

"Eh, what?" said the grandmother, who it appeared was very deaf: "what's the matter? anything wrong? has the gals got the mizzles?"

"Lauk no, mother," shouted Mrs. Nubley in her venerable parent's ears: "I was only a-telling Mary Price that we had been talking about her. Now don't be rude, Pamela," exclaimed the lady, as her elder daughter seized upon one of the wine-cakes—an example which was immediately followed by Arabella. "There now! you make your sister as perwerse and naughty as yourself!"

"Oh, poor little dears, do let them enjoy themselves," said Miss Nibkins, patting their cheeks caressingly: "I like to see them happy, and with a due sense of thankfulness for what heaven is pleased to give them: not but what it is more than any of us deserve in this world of sorrow and of sin," she added, putting on her great horn spectacles.

"Eh, what?" said the old grandmother: "the chimbley a-fire?"

"Miss Nibkins," again bellowed out Mrs. Nubley, "says it's a world of sorrow and of sin."

"Ah! so it is, so it is," rejoined the venerable dame, shaking her head: and then she drank another glass of the Cape Madeira. "A very bad world, and with many a pickpockets in it."

"Don't go yet, Mary Price," exclaimed Mrs. Nubley, as I was about to leave the room. "I han't half done talking to you; for you're quite a heroine in Darby. Pray do tell me, wasn't you seized all over no-how with a sort of flummox when you went into the court before the great judge in his gown and wig. I'm sure if it had been me I should have swooned away:"—and Mrs. Nubley fanned herself with her handkerchief as if well-nigh about to faint at the bare idea.

"Eh, what?" cried the old grandmother, looking alarmed: "got the cholera morbus?"

"Dear me, mother, no!—how silly you be!" exclaimed Mrs. Nubley, who always seemed to forget her lack-a-daisical airs when it was necessary to bawl out to her venerable parent. "We was talking about Mary Price going up afore the big-wig——"

"Eh, what? Mary Price wear a wig? Poor gal, how came she to lose her own hair? Was it fever with delirium trimmings?"

"The old fool!" said Mrs. Nubley, not quite in an under-tone.

"Eh, what?" demanded the old woman, peevishly.

"Mother says you're an old fool, gram'ma," cried Pamela in a shrill voice.

The old lady pinched her lips, and looked thunder at her daughter, who on her part boxed Pamela's ear. The child set up a loud squall; and grandmamma gave her some lollipops which she had brought with her, and which proved effectual in silencing her cries. Arabella received her share; and when I saw that the transient storm had passed, I was about to make another attempt to leave the room, when Mrs. Nubley stopped me again, saying, "Well, Mary, but you han't told me what feelin's stirred in your buzzim when you went up before the big-wig."

"Eh, what?" cried the old lady: but this time Mrs. Nubley took no trouble to satisfy her mother's curiosity.

"I have no doubt," interposed Miss Nibkins, re-adjusting her horn spectacles upon her nose, and assuming a benevolent look and patronizing gentleness of tone, "that Mary conducted herself with great fortitude: for she is naturally a strong-minded young person, and I must do her the justice to say she is very well-behaved and gives me the utmost satisfaction. You are very fond of Mary Price, my dears—are you not?" asked Miss Nibkins, addressing the query to Pamela and Arabella, whose cheeks were swollen out with the lollipops they were sucking.

"Yes, I like her very much," returned Pamela, "because she gives us her bread-and-butter when we have not enough to eat."

"And I never do have enough to eat," immediately added little Arabella.

Miss Nibkins for a moment looked confounded, and then deliberately taking off her horn spectacles, wiped the glasses, and returned them to her reticule in solemn silence: while the old grandmother exclaimed, "Eh, what?" with more querulous impatience than before.

"Don't go, Mary Price," once more said Mrs. Nubley, as I was again about to quit the room: then addressing the old lady she bawled out, "The children says as how they hav'n't enough wittles."

"Eh, what?" repeated the grandmother, turning with a severe look round upon Miss Nibkins: "the children is allowed to play at skittles?"

"My dear madam," the schoolmistress hastened to observe in the blandest tone that it was possible for any living being to assume,—"you as a mother,"—for she was addressing herself to Mrs. Nubley—"must know how very unwholesome it is to let children stuff and cram as much as they fancy——"

"But when I look again at these dear children," interrupted Mrs. Nubley, "it does strike me——"

"Dear children indeed!" said Miss Nibkins, almost melting into tears: "let me give them each, a drop of wine. After all those biscuits it will be as good as a dietetic."

"Eh, what?" said the old grandmother. "What is Miss Nibkins going to do? give the children an emetic?"

"Lawks no, mother!—you get wuss and wuss!" bawled out Mrs. Nubley. "Dearey me, what a pity it is to be so hard of hearing! Miss Nibkins says, about the children's eating, that too much is unwholesome; so she doesn't let 'em stuff and cram."

"Oh! going to give 'em puff and jam, eh?" said the old lady. "Well, it's very kind of her—very kind indeed."

"Nonsense!" cried Mrs. Nubley, impatiently.

"You may go now, Mary," said Miss Nibkins, darting a look at me, which was as much as to enjoin me to withdraw at once, no matter whether Mrs. Nubley should endeavour to keep me or not.

I accordingly hastened away, truly glad to escape from a scene which every moment was becoming more and more unpleasant: for I was very much afraid lest I should be appealed to in respect to the quantity of food the children had to eat—in which case I should most certainly have told the truth.

Half-an-hour afterwards Mrs. Nubley and her mother took their departure; and I suppose that Miss Nibkins succeeded in persuading them that the children had really nothing to complain of—for as I happened to be descending the stairs at the moment the two ladies were taking their leave, I overheard them speak in the most friendly manner to the schoolmistress. But immediately they were gone Miss Nibkins rang the parlour-bell violently for me; and as I entered the room in obedience to the summons, I heard the two children crying bitterly, and also caught the distinct sounds of a couple of boxes on the ear most mercilessly bestowed.

"Mary," said Miss Nibkins, "you will put these children upon bread-and-water diet during the rest of the day. They are naughty, wicked, deceitful girls to tell their mother that they have not enough to eat. But it appears that *you*, Mary, encourage them in their nonsensical whims, by giving them your own food. If I have any more of this, you and I shall part. So mind what I say. And now be off, you little plagues!"—and Miss Nibkins, who was quite savage, pushed the two children roughly towards me.

I hurried them away from the parlour. They were crying bitterly: but I did all I could to console them, and slipped out in the course of the afternoon to buy them each a large bun as a consolation for the bread-and-water diet upon which they were put.

CHAPTER XLIII.

CAPTAIN AND MRS. CALDER.

I HAD been two months at Miss Nibkins' establishment, and it was now the beginning of May. During this interval I had received letters from Ashford, where everything was going on as heretofore in respect to my dear brother William and my two sisters: but of Robert nothing had been heard—and they, as well as I, were at a cruel loss to conjecture what could possibly have become of him Leonard and Ellen had been to call upon me two or three times; and they would have come much oftener, were it not that Miss Nibkins disliked her servants to receive visits. Mrs. Calder had likewise been to see me on several occasions; and each time she brought me some little present. Thus did the two months pass away; and at the expiration of this interval an occurrence took place which must be here related.

One afternoon, as I was seated at a window of the dormitory, occupied in transforming *two* wretchedly tattered little cotton frocks into *one* perfect dress, I heard the rattling of wheels, and beheld the Calders' carriage drive up to the gate of Montpellier House. The Captain alighted first; and having assisted his kind-hearted lady to descend, they entered the establishment together. A few minutes afterwards I was summoned down to the parlour, where they were waiting to see me. On entering the room I was immediately struck by the seriousness of their looks. The good old Captain, in his blue coat and anchor-buttons, his buff waistcoat, and his hessian boots with black tassels, had the same sterling, John Bull, sailor-like appearance as ever: but his ruddy countenance had a care-worn and desponding expression, so that it was evident something weighed heavily on his mind. Mrs. Calder seemed still more depressed; and her eyes were slightly inflamed as if with recent weeping. She embraced me, however, with more affectionate warmth than ever; and Captain Calder, whom I had not seen since I left Merton House, wrung my hand cordially, as he exclaimed, "God bless you, my dear girl: it does my heart good to see you again!"

I felt the tears trickling down my cheeks at these testimonials of kind feeling on the part of this excellent couple—and also because I was deeply pained at observing their evident despondency. But there was a suspicion of the real truth in my mind; and although I thus conjectured the cause, I was very far from being prepared for the serious aspect which the affair was about to take.

Miss Nibkins was not present at the interview between myself and my two kind friends: they were thus enabled to speak without restraint. Making me sit down between them, they gazed upon me in silence for nearly a minute; and then the Captain, suddenly slapping his hand upon his thigh, exclaimed with vehement bluntness, "By Jove, she's well worthy of it!"

I was startled by his ejaculation, the precise meaning of which I could not conjecture, although I saw full well that it must bear upon the subject to which my suspicions had been already directed.

"My dear Mary," said Mrs. Calder, now beginning to explain the real object of their visit, "the Captain and I have come to see you upon a matter which I may describe as being of painful importance. Our son,—our poor boy Edward,—has told us everything—that his heart is devoted to you—that he declared his love some time back—but that you are engaged to another."

I was naturally much confused at these words, although previously prepared by my own conjectures for something of the sort.

"Every fresh trait in your character," continued Mrs. Calder, with tearful eyes and tremulous voice, "proves how excellent is your disposition—how good your principles—how noble your mind. We

are no longer at a loss to understand why you were in such haste to quit Merton House, and why you eagerly accepted the first situation that presented itself—a situation, too, which from certain things that have lately reached our ears, we do not conceive very well suited for you."

"Ever since you left," said Captain Calder, taking up the thread of the explanations, "poor Edward has gone moping about in a manner most alarming as well as afflicting to all who know him. At first we fancied that a change was taking place for the worse in his health; and so indeed it has—but this is rather the effect than the cause of the secret sorrow that has been devouring him. When questioned by his mother or me, he evaded any explanation; and so things have been going on for the last two months. Ah, Mary! if you saw him you would scarcely know him—he is so pale, so thin, and looks so desponding and careworn! When he smiles,—as he often endeavours to do, to cheer his mother and me,—it is such a sickly smile that it makes the heart sad—very sad indeed, to behold it. It would be better to see him burst out into a good fit of crying at once."

Here Captain Calder's voice was choked with the sobs that he vainly endeavoured to keep down; and I could not help weeping bitterly.

"Ah, my dear child," exclaimed Mrs. Calder, taking my hand and looking at me in a sort of earnest appealing manner, "you no doubt understand full well all that the Captain and I want to say to you: for to speak plainly, our own happiness—indeed, the very life of our boy—appears to be in your hands. Yesterday his father and I entreated him to tell us the cause of that grief the existence of which could no longer be concealed from us. Oh! then you should have seen him—that dear, dear Edward—as he fell upon his knees at our feet and in passionate language proclaimed his love for you! He told us that you were no stranger to this feeling on his part—that you had treated him, when he revealed it, with a modesty and a kindness that only endeared you the more completely to his heart—but that you had given him the fatal answer which had annihilated all hope in his breast and reduced him to despondency and despair."

Here the poor lady burst out into a perfect agony of grief; and for some minutes I myself was too deeply affected to be able to give utterance to a word. At length I threw my arms around her neck, beseeching her to compose her feelings, and in broken sentences saying all I could to console her.

"My dear Mary," she resumed at last, "I will tell you why the Captain and myself decided upon visiting you to-day. We know enough of you to entertain the highest esteem for your character, and also to experience a sincere admiration of your merits. Besides, it is no compliment—or at all events, no flattery—to say, that though of humble birth, you are genteel in manners, intelligent, and well-informed. Therefore we could have no reason to blush in asking you to become our daughter—the wife of our Edward. We have entertained the hope that perhaps the answer you gave to Edward, alleging that your affections were bestowed upon another, might only be a well-meant and generously-devised excuse for freeing yourself from his overtures. Perhaps you imagined, with the delicacy which is characteristic of you, that it would savour of ingratitude towards the Captain and me even to listen to the words which Edward uttered at the time. And that such might be the case, I was the more inclined to think and hope, because on no occasion, when confidentially conversing with me, did you even hint that you were under an engagement of marriage. To assure ourselves, therefore, of the actual state of your feelings—but without for a moment wishing to pry into those secrets that your heart for its own reasons may cherish in its concealed depths—have the Captain and I come hither now. Speak, then, Mary—speak—say but the word—is there any hope for our dear boy? will you consent to become our daughter? will you go back with us to Merton House at once, to leave us no more?"

"Mary, before you answer," said the good old Captain, taking my hand and pressing it in his own, "recollect that in us you will find the fondest parents to replace those whom you have lost: for I do love you, my girl—I do love you, my dear child—more than ever I yet loved any one save my wife and son!"

Neither Mrs. Calder nor the Captain would have been suffered by me to say so much, had I been able to cut short their suspense by the promptitude of a frank reply. But I was not able to give it: the sobs that were rising in my throat well nigh suffocated me, choking my utterance. I was profoundly affected, not only at the grief, but also by the kindness of this excellent couple; and without unfaithfulness to my pure and devoted love for Eustace Quentin, I may add that I experienced the deepest sympathy for poor Edward Calder. But at length I was enabled so far to subdue my emotions as to give the requisite explanations. Then I related to Captain and Mrs. Calder all that had ever occurred between myself and Eustace Quentin, concluding with a frank description of the understanding that had been come to on the day when he avowed his love, and how all intercourse and correspondence of every kind was to cease between us until the 1st of November of the year then current.

The Captain and Mrs. Calder listened to me with an affectionate interest, blended however with a deepening despondency, as I went on; and when I concluded my narrative, they exchanged a sad and mournful look, which eloquently said, "There is no hope, then, for our poor boy!"

I will not however dwell at greater length upon this sorrowful scene. Suffice it to say that although the interview resulted in the deepest disappointment for that kind-hearted couple, yet that from all I had told them I had risen higher in their estimation than ever, and they experienced towards me a more friendly and even more affectionate feeling than before. When they were gone I hurried up to my own chamber, and wept again as I reviewed all that had taken place. The incident however confirmed me in a design which I had recently been thinking most seriously of; and this was to leave Derby and obtain a situation in some other part of the country—at Ashford or in its neighbourhood, if possible, so that I might be enabled to see my dear brother William and my two sisters as frequently as my heart dictated. I detested Miss Nibkins' establishment and longed to flee away from the spectacle of ill-used teachers, famishing children, and half-starved servants, which Montpellier House daily, and hourly, and momentarily presented to my view;

and I felt likewise that it was my duty to avoid the chance of meeting Mr. Edward Calder. My resolution to leave Miss Nibkins was therefore finally adopted; and as it happened that the following day completed my second month in her service, I determined to seize the opportunity of giving the requisite notice.

After breakfast next morning, the parlour-bell rang twice; and I proceeded thither. Miss Nibkins, with her great horn spectacles on her nose, was counting out some shillings and sixpences from her purse; and having piled up the little amount of ten shillings, which formed the pittance of my month's earnings, she pointed to it with her long thin sharp finger, saying, "Mary, your wages are due to-day; and therefore it should be a period of thankfulness for you. Nevertheless, your gratitude in receiving this sum—a large sum too, considering the badness of the times—should be tempered with the chastening reflection that heaven gives us far more than, in consequence of our manifold sins, we can possibly deserve."

Now I really did think that the duty of attending to thirty children from about six o'clock in the morning until eleven at night, was well worth ten shillings a month; and therefore I could not possibly take the same view of the case as did Miss Nibkins. But of course I made no comment upon the subject, and having gathered up my money, thanked her, and then said, "If you please, ma'am, I should like to leave you at the end of another month."

Miss Nibkins did not immediately utter a word: but taking off her spectacles, she wiped them, and returned them to her reticule, looking at me very hard in the face the whole time as if to assure herself either that I was serious or that she had heard me aright.

"And so you wish to leave me, do you?" she said at length, but in a voice that I thought was cold and implacable: so it immediately struck me I was about to be enlightened as to a new phase in her character. "Well, I have experienced much ingratitude in this world, and have no doubt it is a punishment for the sins of omission whereof I have been guilty: for, heaven be thanked! in respect to sins of commission, my conscience has no self-accusings. But though I am punished by the ingratitude of others, it does not diminish the crime of such ingratitude on the part of those who demonstrate it."

"I hope, ma'am," was my answer, "that you do not accuse me of ingratitude for the simple reason that I wish to better my condition, and also to remove back again into my native county, so as to be near my brothers and sisters?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" ejaculated Miss Nibkins, with such a sudden manifestation of angry excitement that it seemed as if she were throwing off the mask of demureness and primness, without caring how she revealed herself in her true colours. "Idle good-for-nothing hussies always want to better their condition: and as for going back into Kent to see your brothers and sisters, that's only an excuse. People in your class of life have none of those kind of feelings."

I was at first startled by the abruptness of this display of excitement: but as the foul abuse poured upon my ears, I felt my cheeks becoming crimson with indignation and the blood tingling even to the very tips of my ears. Still restraining my anger however, I moved towards the door for the purpose of quitting the room.

"Stop, young woman!" exclaimed Miss Nibkins: "I have not done speaking yet. Though you have been the heroine of a very pretty drama indeed at the Assize Court, and were even complimented by the Judge, it is no reason why you should give yourself airs here. What are you, after all? Nothing but a common low servant-girl—a mean drudge—a dependent slave!"

"Yes, heaven knows," I exclaimed vehemently, "you have made me all this! But I do not merit your taunts, ma'am:"—and the next moment, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, I burst into tears.

"How dare you come and give me warning in this insolent way?" asked Miss Nibkins. "You ought to be thankful you have got such a good place: but it's always the way with you giddy girls—you no sooner get into a decent, respectable, comfortable situation than you want to better yourselves—which means *more wages and less work*. But for my part, I am not going to encourage such proceedings. You servants are the pest and torment of society. However, it's a rule of my house never to give a character to any servant who has not been with me six months. So now you know: and if you like to withdraw your warning and make an apology for your impudence, I don't mind keeping you."

"I can assure you, ma'am," was my answer, delivered firmly but respectfully, "that I am incapable of showing you any insolence; and if I said something sharply just now, it was because you provoked me. I know I am only a servant: but I beg to submit that servants have their feelings as well as masters or mistresses—and you unnecessarily wounded mine."

"All this is very pretty indeed," exclaimed Miss Nibkins, with a savage look and a cutting irony of tone; "but I don't receive moral lectures from servants. You will perhaps think twice of it: for mind, if you leave me before the six months, you will have no character from me, and I shall take very good care that your friends—the Calders," she added contemptuously, "are made acquainted with the fact that you are as impudent, deceitful, lazy, and good-for-nothing a girl as ever was."

I left the room without making any answer; for Miss Nibkins' threats did not at all terrify me. I knew very well that Captain and Mrs. Calder would not be misled concerning me by any malicious representation which Miss Nibkins might make; but that on the contrary, they would cheerfully give me a character to enable me to obtain a fresh place.

A week elapsed, during which period Miss Nibkins had resumed her wonted demeanour towards me—that is to say, appearing prim and demure in her looks, mild and melancholy in her voice, but particular as ever in watching over the performance of my duties. She did not however treat me with any increased harshness—doubtless fancying that I should think better of the notice I had given and remain in her service: for, as I learnt from the other domestics, she never had a young person who did so much work for so small a stipend as I. But setting aside the reason in respect to Mr. Edward Calder, which was prompting me to remove elsewhere, I daily and hourly experienced an increasing aversion for Miss Nibkins' establishment. It was impossible to eat the food supplied for dinner; and I therefore either had to go without my regular

meals, or else purchase food with my own wages. It was the same with the other servants; and as the wretched pittances which they received for their drudgery and hard work actually went in buying victuals, they scarcely had anything left to lay out in clothes. In respect to dress, therefore, they were a positive disgrace to the establishment—supposing it could be disgraced in any such manner.

Moreover, the dirty tricks and mean artifices which Miss Nibkins practised in a variety of ways to increase her gains, and which by degrees came to my knowledge, gave me a perfect loathing for a character that sought to conceal its utter baseness beneath the veil of canting language and hypocritical demureness of look. For instance, if a single window were broken by accident and the repair cost half-a-crown, she would put down three-and-sixpence in the bill of every girl in the school—thus charging sixty three-and-sixpences for one half-crown window. When a charity sermon was preached at the church, every girl in the Lower Division had a penny given her to put in the plate; but sixpence was charged for that object in every bill. In the Upper Division the sum really given to the girls for the plate was two-pence,—a shilling being marked in each quarterly account. All the young ladies in the Upper Division learnt dancing; and at the commencement of each quarter Miss Nibkins ordered in thirty pairs of shoes, all of the same size, for which she paid three shillings each pair: these had to be worn by girls of all sizes, from ten years old to seventeen, just in the same way as the coats are distributed, without discrimination as to size or stature, to the General and Twopenny Postmen on the royal birthday. Respecting the shoes, the consequence was that while some were twice too large for the girls, others were proportionately too small, and they either tumbled off the feet as they tried to shuffle through the steps with them, or else pinched the feet to a degree of perfect martyrdom. Each

pair of shoes was charged five shillings and sixpence in the quarterly account. The same course was adopted with the gloves,—a quantity being ordered of a medium size; so that half were too large and half too small for the wearers. Miss Nibkins paid two shillings a pair, and charged three-and-sixpence in the bills. In addition to all these sources of revenue, Miss Nibkins levied a discount upon the bills of the dancing and drawing masters who attended at the school, and encouraged the latter to run up his accounts as much as possible, by charging for double the quantity of pencils, paints, card-board, and camel-hair brushes, than were really supplied to the pupils.

But these were only a few of the artifices practised to swell the quarterly bills and put money into Miss Nibkins' pocket. I must specify a few more of her disgraceful meannesses. With regard to school-books—the old ones, which girls who had gone away had forgotten to take with them, were supplied to new pupils; and the coolness with which those old torn dog's-eared volumes were charged in the bills the full price of new ones, showed with what flagrant impudence these petty robberies were accomplished. Then Miss Nibkins always kept in her desk a large supply of slate-pencils, which she purchased wholesale for a ridiculously small trifle; but the pupils were compelled to buy these slate-pencils of her out of their own pocket-money at a half-penny per stick; and as few of the poor girls were allowed more than two-pence a-week pocket-money—some indeed only a penny—even this little compulsory tax upon them was felt as a heavy privation, especially as they were constantly hungry and wanted all their little means to buy cakes or rolls of bread. Again, when a piece of new music was introduced into the school, two or three copies only were supplied; but in every quarterly bill the price was duly charged.

But there was a certain custom which Miss Nibkins had artfully introduced into her establishment as another means of emolument to herself. This was the habit of making her presents on the part of the school-girls. Amongst the teachers there was always sure to be one who would play the sycophant and parasite towards Miss Nibkins, in order to obtain any such little indulgence as this lady might think an adequate reward for the servility shown her. To this favoured teacher would Miss Nibkins from time to time drop a certain hint; and the teacher, as if acting entirely from her own spontaneous good feeling, would suggest to the elder school-girls the propriety of making Miss Nibkins a present on her birthday—or to celebrate the anniversary of the school's foundation—or any other pretext which the fertile brain of the teacher could suggest. Then, as Miss Nibkins knew pretty well which of the girls had parents who were likely to give their daughters money for this purpose, letters were written under the teacher's superintendence to those parents, and the results were generally successful: but on the other hand, those girls whose parents were known to be either too mean or too poor to give anything at all to the subscription list, were recommended by the artful teacher to save up a month's or six weeks' pocket money so as to make their contribution. Then out of their meagre salaries the teachers themselves were expected to give something: indeed, they could not possibly refuse;—and thus three or four pounds (sometimes more) were collected for the purchase of a present—such as a gold pencil-case, a silver cream-jug, a rose-wood writing-desk, or some ornaments for the parlour mantel. Then, on the day fixed for presenting the gift, Miss Nibkins—though duly prepared by the teacher who was her secret agent in getting up the whole affair—would enter the school-room as if perfectly innocent of what was going to take place, and on beholding the gift standing upon her desk, with a beautifully written note expressing whence it came, she would put on her great horn spectacles and affect to be quite overpowered with surprise. The elegantly written note would announce the gift as "a testimonial of love and affection to Miss Nibkins from her dutiful pupils,"—every one of whom, by the bye, hated her most cordially. But in these moments—with the natural generosity of the youthful heart whose freshness of feeling is not yet marred by contact with the world—the poor girls would forget their dislike and really experience a sense of gratification at bestowing the present. Poor things! they little thought that the whole was a deeply-laid trick on the part of a mercenary schoolmistress for her own special advantage—and that the teacher had all along been a mere servile tool, and not the spontaneous mover in the proceeding.

There are many other circumstances which I could adduce as illustrative of these despicable phases in Miss Nibkins' character: but I think I have said enough to show her in her true colours. The reader cannot therefore be astonished if I were anxious to get away from such a mistress. But a circumstance occurred which compelled me somewhat to change, or rather modify my resolution in this respect. It was three weeks after the scene with Captain and Mrs. Calder—and therefore only one week to the expiration of the month's notice which I had given to leave Montpellier House—when I received the following letter:—

"Merton House,
"May 26th, 1829.

"My dear Mary,

"We leave this day for the purpose of proceeding to the Continent. My son's health is so much impaired that Dr. Scott has ordered an immediate removal to a southern climate. We therefore intend to visit the South of France, and perhaps repair to Italy. Rest assured, my dear girl, that if the Captain and I do not come personally to bid you farewell, it is not that our friendship for you has suffered any diminution, but because it would be scarcely possible to avoid touching upon a topic which must be painful to us all. We shall never forget you, and from time to time shall write to let you know where we are, so that you may answer us and tell us in return how you are getting on. I shall write to you at the Post Office, Derby; so that if you leave your present situation and go to any other part of the country, you can forward your next address to the Post Office that any letters may duly follow you. The Captain hopes that you will not be offended by his enclosing you a small testimonial of the esteem he experiences for your character; and he has sent it in a pecuniary shape, because it may be serviceable in any emergency that may arise: for it would grieve us sorely to leave England with the apprehension that by being any length of time out of service you were subjected to privations.

"The carriage is now at the door, and we are about to leave—heaven only knows when to return! God bless you, Mary; and may you experience all the happiness which the world can possibly give, and which you so fully deserve.

"Your's affectionately,
"Emma Calder."

I shed tears over this kind letter; and I was pro-

foundly grieved to think that I, though so innocently, was the cause of that failing health on the part of Mr. Edward which compelled such worthy friends to abandon their home and seek a foreign clime. The letter contained a bank-note for twenty pounds, and I locked it up in my trunk, regarding it as a memorial of friendship, not to be changed unless in case of emergency.

But I now suddenly found myself placed in a somewhat awkward situation. I had intended, ere leaving Derby, to procure a written recommendation from Mrs. Calder; but it was now too late. Miss Nibkins had positively refused to give me a character unless I remained with her six months: and how was I to obtain another place without one? Even if I returned to Ashford, where I was known, I should find it difficult to enter any family without proper and explicit references, not merely as to the integrity of my recent career since I had been absent from my native place, but also with regard to my capacity for the duties of a situation. It is true Mrs. Calder's kind letter was in itself an excellent testimonial; but families are so suspicious they might think it forged, or that Mrs. Calder herself could not be a real lady to have written so familiarly to a servant-maid. Besides, the letter itself must be regarded in the light of a confidential communication, alluding as it did to a painful topic concerning which I was in honour bound to give no explanation, if questioned. To be brief, my position was exactly this—that if I left Miss Nibkins at present I could offer no reference as to character, and I did not dare risk the chance of remaining without a situation for want of such a reference. I knew not how to act: a certain sentiment of pride prevented me from asking Miss Nibkins to allow me to stop; and thus day after day passed until my notice had expired and the hour for my departure came.

I went into the parlour to receive my wages, and having made up my mind to trust to the chapter of accidents as to the course I should pursue. But Miss Nibkins herself relieved me of my embarrassment by taking the initiative in what might be termed amicable proposals. She represented to me that the holidays were close at hand—that it would be very awkward for her to change servants just at this period—and that if I would only remain another month she would give me a character on leaving. I cheerfully assented to her proposal, and agreed to remain four weeks longer at Montpellier House,—deeply rejoiced to think that I should gain my object without having to stay the whole six months.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE HOLIDAYS.

The wonted preliminaries of breaking-up had already commenced in the form of the usual holiday-letter, which Miss Nibkins drew up with the utmost care, and which was duly copied by every girl throughout the establishment. The one for the present half-year's vacation ran as follows:—

"Montpellier House, Derby,
"June 1, 1829.

"My dear Parents,

"I am happy to inform you that the suspension of studies at Miss Nibkins' establishment will commence on the 22nd of this month; and although I am truly rejoiced at the prospect of returning home, my delight is tempered with a regret at leaving those studies which your bounty enables me to pursue, as well as the kind preceptress under whose fostering care they are thus pursued.

"I hope that you will find me improved, not only in the various branches of education in which I am instructed, but also in my manners, my general deportment, and the religious tone of my mind; so that I may prove a comfort to you, as well as a credit to my kind preceptress.

"Give my love to my brothers and sisters, and all relatives and friends, and accept the same,

"My dear Parents,
"From your affectionate and dutiful
"Daughter,
"_____"

Such was the holiday-letter: but a little incident which I must mention, occurred at the time these general circulars were being sent off. One of the elder girls privately penned *another* letter to her parents, and slipping it into the hands of the housemaid just as she was going to the post, asked her to put it into the box along with all the rest. The housemaid consented, but accidently dropped it in the hall. Miss Nibkins picked it up—unceremoniously opened it—and the reader may guess with what amount of dismay she perused the following lines:—

"June 1, 1829.

"Dear Pa and Ma,

"We have just been writing the hollyday letters, and for fear you should think I rely ment all that's said in the coppy you will reseave, I sitt down to smuggle over these fu lines, because if I was caught writing privett I should get into a most orkard scrape. When I am maid to say that I regret leving my studdies, I was maid to tel a fibb, because I don't considder them studdies at all which one has to lern by art and don't know the moning of, which is the case with the french, and the onglish exersizes, and the jeographical definishuns, besides other things too tcjus to mention now. As for my writing and speling, I know that I am perfishent in those and so could just as well studdy all the rest at home as at Miss nibkins's. Dear pa and ma, prey don't lett me come back after the hollydays because its of no use and we are treted horrid, not having half enough to eat and sour bere to drink which is very nasty and gives us all the stommack ake. Miss nibkins is a regular hippocrit, and when she makes me say in my letter that she's kind its all nonsince, for there's no kindness in her except to herself when she drinks her tost and water which is all brandy. As for my manners I know they can't be improved here while one of the teachers eats with her knife and another is left-anded, and dear pa and ma, I am obliged to sit next to a chesemonger's daughter at table on my rite hand and a taylor's daughter on my left, which is very hard considering that you dear pa are a gentleman and ma is a lady bread and born. So, I do hopp you will take me away these hollydays, and ask grandma if she don't think it will be best as all the meat we have is raw and all the puddings so nasty they won't agree with any stommack, and I am sure uncle John wouldn't give them to his piggs. So no more at present from your affectionate daughter, dear pa and ma,

"Sarah Briggs."

It was through one of the teachers I heard of this letter being written, and by some means or another she procured me a sight of it; on which occasion I took a copy exactly as it was penned. It is but fair, however, towards Miss Nibkins' establishment, to state that Sarah Briggs was certainly one of the idlest and most backward girls in the Upper Department, and that though she was thirteen years old, there were many young ladies of eight or nine in the Lower Division who were far more advanced

in their studies. With regard to the incident of the letter itself, Miss Sarah Briggs was put upon bread-and-water for three days as a punishment, and made to practice nothing but spelling during the rest of the time that intervened to the holidays.

And now indeed the grand preparations for breaking-up commenced in right good earnest. Then what a bustle was there in getting ready the boxes for the pupils who were to return home. Miss Nibkins, in order to please the parents, made it a rule to send back the children's clothes in as good a condition as was possible; and I had therefore so much needlework to do that I had to rise soon after day-light in order to commence my task. Holiday-day came, and happiness now appeared upon countenances that for months had been languid, care-worn, and full of despondency. It is astonishing how soon children recover their spirits, and also what an effect good spirits have upon their outward appearance;—and it did my heart good to think that for those poor innocent ill-treated and half-famished beings, there was at least the periodical return of seasons of happiness great enough to serve as a recompense for a large amount of suffering!

But if my own spirits were temporarily excited by the spectacle of the many happy faces which holiday-day presented to my view, they were soon damped again by the contemplation of the bitter grief experienced by a few poor girls who remained at school during the vacation. Of these there were six,—four in the Lower Division, and two, who were sisters, in the Upper Department. The four little ones were in no way related to each other, and belonged to different parents, who had their own reasons for leaving the poor children at school during the holidays. The two girls who were sisters were orphans, dependent entirely upon an uncle who cared nothing about them, and thought that he was doing a great deal by even paying for their education and board at all. Never shall I forget the morning of what was called "Breaking-up Day." All the girls who were going home were, as I have already said, elated with joy. Those whose parents lived in the town were waiting to be fetched: those whose homes were at a distance, waited for the coaches, post-chaises, or other vehicles that were to bear them to their parents' arms. All these were chattering gaily of what they should do in the holidays—what amusements they should have—what nice things they should be treated with—and what pleasant days they should spend with fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and fond relatives. But apart from these merry, joyous groups who were waiting ready dressed for the moment of departure, sat the poor girls who were to remain behind. The four little ones, whose ages ranged from six to nine, sat together in one corner, crying as if their hearts would break. Poor creatures! young as they were, the iron of affliction was already entering deep into their souls—wounding them too in the most sensitive part: for it is cruel—Oh! it is cruel, for a child of tender age to have the dreary desolating conviction forced upon its mind that it has no home! As for the two sisters, whose ages were fourteen and sixteen, they sat together clasping each other's hands—gazing on each other's pale, melancholy, and care-worn countenances—and endeavouring for each other's sake to keep down those sobs and all that pent-up grief which surged up into their throats, violently seeking to burst forth. And they, poor girls, also felt that they had no home!

By eleven o'clock on breaking-up day all those who were to depart had gone; and I happened to be in the school-room when the last two or three were fetched away. Would to heaven I had not been there at such a moment!—for never shall I forget the intenseness of that anguish with which the two sisters, now no longer able to restrain themselves, suddenly threw themselves into each other's arms and gave vent to the full tide of their feelings. They were sweet pretty girls too,—delicate-looking, lady-like, and well-behaved young creatures, who might have made their parents' pride had heaven spared those parents for them. I did not immediately approach them—not merely because there seemed to be something too sacred in such grief as their's to be precipitately intruded on, but also because I myself was so profoundly affected as to be compelled to turn away and veil my tears. But presently, when I noticed that the first paroxysm of anguish had passed, I did accost those sisters, and spoke as cheeringly to them as I could. Nor did I neglect the four younger girls, but endeavoured to console them also. I remember that I went out, and proceeding to the nearest pastry-cook, spent several shillings in purchasing all kinds of nice things, with which I sped back to those whose really desolate and forlorn condition had so deeply enlisted my sympathies. The two sisters thanked me with heartfelt gratitude, and even threw their arms around my neck and embraced me for what they were pleased to term my well-meant kindness: but their grief was too profound, and moreover they were too old, to be solaced in such a manner. Nevertheless, I had the satisfaction of observing that for the time being the four little things partially forgot their sorrows as they sat down to the feast I thus prepared for them.

It happened that on the following day Mrs. Baker and Ellen came to visit me; and the holidays having begun, they invited me to pass a day with them at the farm. It immediately struck me that, without much inconvenience to my worthy friends, I might procure a day's pleasure for the poor girls who had been left at school during the vacation; and on mentioning the case, both Mrs. Baker and Ellen were quite enthusiastic in the hope that Miss Nibkins would give her consent. I accordingly proceeded to the parlour, and made the inquiry. Miss Nibkins put on her horn spectacles, as she always did when any matter of importance was submitted to her; and for nearly a minute she meditated in silence. I have not the slightest doubt she was weighing in her mind to what extent she would be a gainer by saving a day's provisions in respect to myself and the six girls—or whether it would be more to her advantage to make me stick close to needlework at Montpellier House. However, she decided in the favourable sense; and when I communicated the proposed jaunt to the two sisters and the four little girls, pleasure beamed in their eyes.

Very early on the following morning Mr. Percival himself came to fetch us in a chaise which, with the most delicate kindness, he had hired for the occasion; and we arrived at his farm to breakfast. It was a treat to me as well as to the poor girls to get into the open country, and breathe the fresh air of the hills of Derbyshire. Mrs. Baker and Ellen gave us a most cordial reception; and such a breakfast as was served up, the poor girls had not seen for many a long day! Cold fowls, ham, tongue, new-laid eggs,

home-made bread, tea and coffee, the freshest butter, and milk warm from the cow, appeared upon the hospitable board. The ride had given us an appetite; and moreover we were all in goods spirits to do justice to the excellent fare. We then set out for a ramble all over the farm; and I was rejoiced to hear from both Leonard and Ellen that their prospects were of the brightest character. We got back to dinner at one o'clock; and afterwards amused ourselves in the fowl-yard, the dairy, and the garden, till tea-time. After tea we sat in a beautiful summer-house in the garden, conversing until it was time to leave; and then Leonard took us back again to Derby in the chaise which he had hired for our accommodation. A large cake and a variety of little delicacies had been put up in a hamper for the schoolgirls; and thus I had the satisfaction of being the means of their spending at least one happy day during the vacation that they had to remain at school.

I was seated at work in my own chamber on the following day, when at about eleven o'clock in the forenoon the housemaid came up, saying, "Two gentlemen wish to speak to you, Mary, down stairs. Miss Nibkins is out; so I showed them into the parlour and you can go down there to them. They have sent up their cards."

I took the cards and glanced at the names. One was Mr. Fitzherbert Reginald Tomlinson: the other was Mr. Horatio Mortimer Stanley. Both these names were utterly unknown to me—I had never heard them before—and therefore, at once concluding there must be some mistake, asked the housemaid to give me a description of their appearance.

"Oh! they are quite gentlemen, I can assure you," she replied. "One is a tall, stout, portly man, who looks and walks quite as grand as a lord, and speaks in such a tone of command as if he had at least a dozen servants at home whom he is accustomed to order about. The other is quite young, not above twenty or one-and-twenty, I should say—with dark hair and eyes——And now that I think of it, he is something like you. He has quite a genteel air, and also speaks as if he was some great personage. Indeed, to tell you the truth, I think they must be at least lords in disguise—if not princes: for they have got loads of jewellery about them."

A suspicion that had suddenly entered my head in consequence of one remark which fell from the housemaid's lips, caused me to lose no time in going down stairs: but just as my fingers touched the handle of the parlour-door, I heard a strange din, or rather quick succession of metallic sounds, inside the room, like the clashing together of the fire-irons, and then a deep sonorous voice exclaimed, "Traitor, thou shalt die! Thine hour is come. Ah! thinkest thou that any longer this earth shall be desecrated by thy presence? I defy thee and thy taunts. Thou who hast deprived me of my kingly rank, and usurped my golden sceptre and my gem-bedecked diadem, shalt now meet the usurper's doom. Behold! that thrust has avenged me! Perish, vile traitor: thy career of crime is ended! What ho, guards! come hither! the usurper is slain—and in me thou seest thy rightful Sovereign!"

The stupefaction of mingled terror and astonishment had transfixed me to the spot as my ears caught the first words of this address: but when I could no longer doubt that it was merely the recitation of some dramatic part, I still lingered for a few moments outside the parlour-door to recover the presence of mind which had received so cruel a shock by the apparently awful import of the opening words. The moment the harangue was concluded, it was followed by a burst of laughter on the part of the two individuals in the room; and at the same time I heard the fire-irons flung down again into the fender. Hesitating no longer to enter, I at once perceived that the suspicion I had entertained from what the housemaid told me, was correct. In short, one of the visitors was none other than my brother Robert.

I flew into his arms, and embraced him with all the tenderness that my heart experienced towards him. But he seemed rather to permit me thus to caress him, than to return my fond embrace; and at length disengaging himself from my arms, he cried, "Well Mary, what a fine tall girl you have grown, to be sure! But allow me to introduce you to my friend Mr. Fitzherbert Reginald Tomlinson."

I turned and made the proper salutation to the tall, stout, portly individual whom the housemaid had described: and I observed that he was surveying me with a fixed and earnest attention. Had the housemaid regarded both him and my brother with more than a cursory notice, she would have seen that though they were flashily dressed, yet it was only in what is termed a shabby-genteel style. Their coats were somewhat threadbare: their gaudy patterned waistcoats were soiled and faded: the jewellery they wore was mere stage-trumpery: their linen was not exactly of the cleanest; and their hats had evidently seen much service. In respect to both I am bound to say—though it is with pain I am compelled to record matters of a disparaging nature concerning my brother—there was a certain swaggering air of jaunty impudence mingled with the unequivocal signs of dissipated habits,—a third-class kind of rakishness, emulating the look of fashionable depravity worn by *roués* of the higher sphere. My brother had grown much taller; but his personal appearance had deteriorated,—his eyes being somewhat sunken, his cheeks haggard, and the freshness of youth altogether marred by the unmistakable effects of debauchery. As for his friend Mr. Fitzherbert Reginald Tomlinson, he was about six-and-thirty years of age, wore his whiskers closely shaved, and had his cheeks plastered with *rouge* in a manner that could not deceive the most superficial observer. As he stood surveying me, with one hand carelessly thrust into the bosom of his waistcoat, and the other jauntily placed upon his hip, he had the perfect air of a theatrical king contemplating with a half-patronizing, half-admiring self-sufficiency, some individual who was performing a minor character.

"I say, Mary," exclaimed my brother Robert, flinging himself into Miss Nibkins' easy-chair, stretching out his legs, and laughing loudly, "weren't you surprised when our cards were put into your hand? I dare say you couldn't fancy who the deuce Mr. Fitzherbert Reginald Tomlinson or Mr. Horatio Mortimer Stanley could possibly be? But now you know. I told my friend here that we should surprise you—and so we have. I say, Tomlinson, what a lark—isn't it?"

"That is a vulgar term, Mr. Stanley," pompously answered Mr. Tomlinson, with a tone and look of perfectly regal rebuke. "Miss Price," he continued, "I am charmed to have the honour of making your acquaintance—for you have been the heroine of a

great and a mighty drama, with the whole nation for the moment as your delighted auditory. Permit me to announce myself as the manager of that company of *artistes* to which your brother belongs, and in which he, to his high credit and wide-spread renown, takes the hero's part. At this present moment, as the bills announce, I am Sole Lessee, for six nights only, of the Theatre Royal, Derby. Boxes three shillings—pit two shillings—gallery a shilling: doors open at half-past seven—performance to commence at eight precisely."

"What the deuce are you doing, Tomlinson?" exclaimed Robert, bursting out into a louder laugh than before. "Reciting the last lines of the play-bill, I declare!"

"True! my thoughts were wandering, friend," was the Sole Lessee's grave and solemn reply. "Miss Price, everything connected with the sublime art of which I am a disciple, has become as it were a portion of my nature, interweaving itself with all my thoughts, regulating all my habits! The drama is to me life and existence, as well as board, lodging, clothes, washing, meat——"

"And gin also," added Robert, with another laugh.

"Aye, young man—and gin also, if thou wilt," rejoined Mr. Tomlinson with stern solemnity: "that is to say, when I can get it. But you see, Miss Price," he continued, again addressing himself to me, "habit is second nature; and the drama, with all its pageantry and appurtenances, its business and its bustle, its activity and its life, is everything to me. Even while tarrying a few minutes ere now, until you did make your most gracious appearance, I could not waste my time in idle thought, but was fain to rehearse a part. So I with poker armed, and your valiant brother grasping the murderous tongs, we rehearsed a portion of the splendid drama in which we shall appear to-night. Behold the play-bill. The first piece is the *Rightful King and the Wrongful Usurper*. Now mark the characters! KING, Mr. Fitzherbert Reginald Tomlinson. USURPER, Mr. Horatio Mortimer Stanley."

"Oh! don't bother my sister with all that now," exclaimed Robert, springing up from the easy chair and snatching from Mr. Tomlinson's hand the long play-bill which he had just unfolded and was sententiously describing: "but let's come to the point at once."

"Then do you, as my faithful lieutenant, with the trumpet-tongue of a herald, announce the grave import of the business that hath brought us hither:"—and thus speaking, with immense pomposity, the Sole Lessee of the Derby theatre seated himself on a sofa.

Although there was much of the ludicrous in this scene, yet it was too painful in its influence upon me to do otherwise than excite mournful reflections: for I could not possibly think that the profession of a strolling player, which my brother had adopted, was at all calculated to improve his morals or encourage him in steadiness of habits.

"Well, Mary, then I will come to the point at once," said he, having resumed his seat in Miss Nibkins' easy-chair. "It was not altogether an accidental thing our troop coming to Derby; but I thought it very likely, from all I read in the papers some months back, you were either here or in the neighbourhood; and I told my friend Tomlinson that if he did come into these parts I would try and find you out. We only arrived here the day before yesterday; and as you see by the play-bill, Mr. Tomlinson has taken the theatre for six nights; but when it says for six nights only, that's all gammon. If our troop draws, we shall stay here some weeks. I made inquiries all day yesterday, and couldn't hear of you till late last night, when I found out where you were. So here we are, to see you: and if any arrangement can be made, I have no doubt it will be a deuced good thing for the troop as well as for you."

I stared at my brother with unfeigned astonishment, thinking that I had caught some idea of his meaning, and yet more than half doubting whether my conjecture could be possibly correct.

"You are going much too fast, young officer of mine," said the Manager, now breaking silence once more. "Your sister comprehends you not."

"Ah! I had forgotten that I hadn't broached the subject thoroughly," exclaimed Robert: "but I will soon do so. The fact is, Mary, I don't like the idea of your continuing in service: it's too low for a genteel and pretty girl like you. Actresses have married lords—hav'n't they, friend Tomlinson?"

"I'faith! the stage hath furnished forth peeresses to shine in the brilliant sphere of aristocracy," was the Manager's pompous reply.

"And so," pursued Robert, "I have been thinking, Mary, that it would be best for you to cut service altogether and come and join us."

"Robert!" I exclaimed, shocked and afflicted at the proposal; "how can you address me in these terms?"

"And why not?" he answered carelessly, at the same time running his fingers, which were studded with theatrical rings of gilt copper and glass brilliants, through his well-oiled hair. "Mr. Tomlinson will tell you that if you would only consent to try your fortune on the boards, your success could not fail to be splendid. What a *debut* you would have, to be sure! Tomlinson will have a piece written expressly for you. Only fancy—the *Murdered Gamekeeper, or the Heroine of the Court of Justice!*"

"HEROINE, Miss Mary Price," incidentally observed the Manager, as if quoting from a visionary play-bill in which he beheld all the attractions of the suggested drama, with me as the principal character, duly set forth in all the boldness and variety of type.

"Enough of this, Robert!" I exclaimed. "I will not—I dare not—think that you are serious in making me such proposals."

"Never more serious in my life, Mary," returned my brother. "Was I, Tomlinson?"

"Never, young man," replied the Sole Lessee. "Miss Price, I do sincerely hope that for your own interests and those of the drama generally, you will think seriously of this offer. Depend upon it that your success would be brilliant. A domestic tragedy, founded on fact, and with the real Mary Price taking the principal part, would be a tremendous hit."

"Mr. Tomlinson," I said, somewhat indignantly, "you at least cannot put forward the claim of relationship as an excuse for insulting me. Once for all, therefore, I request that nothing more may be said upon this subject:"—then turning to my brother, I added, "Robert, can I speak to you alone?"

"Oh, certainly! Let me not be a barrier in the way," exclaimed Mr. Fitzherbert Reginald Tomlin-

son: and rising with stage majesty from his seat, he said, "Maiden, I bid thee farewell, leaving thee with this brother of thine; and may his persuasive tongue find words to touch thine adamantine heart, and move it to feel tender sympathy for the all-engrossing interests of England's drama!"

With these words Mr. Tomlinson waved his arm majestically and stalked out of the room. The next moment I heard the front door open and shut, and then beheld his portly form proceeding with stately grandeur down the garden to the iron gate.

"Robert—my dear Robert," I now said, approaching my brother and taking his hand,—"what have you been doing with yourself for this long, long time? why have you not communicated with me or William? why have you made us endure the tortures of suspense as to what had become of you, so that we knew not whether you were even still living?"

"Oh! I don't suppose you particularly cared," he answered, almost savagely. "You see when I do come to you and propose something for your good, you reject it as if I was actually asking you to disgrace yourself. Why—don't you think it's more respectable to be a popular actress than a poor wretched drudge of a servant maid?"

"I will not discuss the point with you, Robert," was my answer. "Heaven forbid that I should attempt to depreciate the merits or the character of any persons who endeavour to obtain their living honestly; and there are no doubt many excellent people in the profession which you appear to have adopted. But at all events it has no attractions for *me;* and certainly the way in which the proposal was just now made, was somewhat calculated to annoy and disgust me. But let that pass. I am truly rejoiced to see you: it is a relief to my mind that we have met again. Tell me, however, dear Robert, are you happy? are you comfortable and contented in your new position?"

"As happy as the day is long," he exclaimed. "You can judge for yourself whether Tomlinson isn't a first-rate fellow; and he and I are thick as possible together."

"But why have you changed your name?" I asked, in my ignorance of stage customs.

"Why?—because everybody who has got a queer name, does it," answered Robert. "There's something precious low and vulgar in the name of Price. Only fancy reading in the playbills, '*This night will be performed Shakspeare's immortal play of Hamlet.* HAMLET, *Prince of Denmark,* MR. PRICE.'—That wouldn't do at all. But when you come to read, 'HAMLET, *Prince of Denmark,* MR. HORATIO MORTIMER STANLEY,' it sounds uncommonly fine. Why, what do you think Tomlinson's real name is? You would never guess. Sniffkins! Now only fancy reading in a playbill, '*This night will be performed Shakspeare's immortal play of Hamlet;*' and amongst the characters, 'GHOST, Mr. Sniffkins.' It would never do: the audience would laugh ready to split their sides when he made his appearance. But when the playbill announces, 'GHOST, Mr. Fitzherbert Reginald Tomlinson,' there is nothing at all to laugh at: it both looks and sounds well."

"And how long have you been with his troop?" I inquired.

"Oh! for the last six months," returned Robert. "The fact is, I got tired of the life I led with——"

Here he stopped short, and then said something by way of turning the conversation into another channel.

"You meant to allude to those two dreadful men," said I, "whose company I implored you to leave when I saw you at the public-house at Ashford. Ah, Robert! do you know the full extent of those men's fearful character? do you know that they endeavoured to murder me—yes, murder me at Dover——"

"I did hear Sawbridge and the Bulldog talking about it one day in London, when they didn't think I was listening," replied my brother, evidently confused and ashamed at having ever been associated with those villains who had attempted the life of his sister: "and that was the reason I parted from them."

"Thank God you did!" I exclaimed, clasping my hands fervently. "Oh, Robert! you know not how many scalding tears I have shed on your behalf—how many sleepless nights I have passed when thinking of you—and how much horrible apprehension I have entertained when wondering what would become of you! For I have long known the fearful use those dreadful characters were making of you——"

It was on the tip of my tongue to state that I was no stranger to the circumstance of Robert having been led into the burglarious attempt made at Twisden Lodge, when I was in service there: but I stopped short ere giving utterance to the dread words which should brand my own brother as a criminal. He saw however what was passing in my mind—he read my thoughts—and his brow grew dark as night, while his manner became filled with confusion. "Thank God!" I thought to myself, "remorse has touched him, and he is penitent!" But the next moment he burst into a loud laugh, as if to take refuge from his confusion in the hardihood of coarse merriment; and rising up from his seat, exclaimed, "My eye! what a precious lark it was that night!—and I took refuge in your room until the storm had blown over!"

"O heavens!" I cried, bursting into tears, "is it possible, Robert, that you can make a jest of so dreadful a circumstance? Robert, my dear brother Robert, I beseech—I implore you to repent of your past misdeeds—to look back upon them with contrition and regret——"

"Oh! bother all sermons, Mary!" was the quick and sharp interruption: "if you're going to harangue me in that way, the sooner I am off the better. But by jingo! how capital you would be in tragedy. Depend upon it you have mistaken your avocation in devoting yourself to brats and bantlings: so once more I recommend you to come and join us. You would beat Miss Araminta Rosina Flummery——that's our principal actress——all to shivers. But what the deuce are you crying now for? Why, what a fool of a girl you are! You don't know the pleasures of a strolling life. There we are, the whole troop of us, at a very comfortable inn—the *Shoulder of Mutton*—that's the sign—and if you'll come and sup with us to-night at twelve o'clock, when the performance is over, you will find yourself as comfortable as boiled tripe and hot gin-and-water can possibly make you. Come—what do you say? I'll be bound you can sneak out of the house if you like; and your precious Miss Dibkins, or Fibkins, or whatever her old name is, won't be a bit the wiser."

"Robert, Robert," I cried, almost hysterically,

"do for heaven's sake give up this kind of talk. There is something dreadfully flippant in it all! Oh, my dear brother——"

"Well, if you are going into the dismals again, the sooner I cut my stick the better. So bye bye, Mary:"—and without offering to embrace me, or even to shake me by the hand, he stuck his hat on one side of his head and was moving towards the door.

"Robert," I said, springing forward and catching him by the arm, "do not leave me for a moment."

"But I must go to rehearsal," he answered. "Tomlinson is sure to stand pots of porter, and they'll drink it all up if I don't make haste—they are all such beggars to lush; and Miss Araminta Rosina Flummery will toss off a pot of porter before you could say Jack Robinson."

"Robert," I said,—and I knew that I was speaking in a deeply dismal tone, for I felt very wretched indeed,—"I am going to leave Derby in a day or two, and perhaps we shall not see each other for some time again——Unless indeed you will leave these people whom you are now with, and will accompany me back into Kent? If so, I can pay your fare by the coach: and, Oh! if you would only seek some respectable situation again——"

"Respectable!" he ejaculated, with a wrathful look: "do you mean to insinuate that I am not in a respectable situation as it is? Look here, Mary," he added with a knowing wink; "Tomlinson assures me I have got the talent—and one of these days you will just see me eclipsing Kean or Kemble. So look out—that's all! And now I am off."

He was turning away, and I had not the courage to detain him any longer. I felt sick at heart: the rakishness of his look, the flippancy of his discourse, and the under-current of heartlessness which (Oh, that I should have to say it!) was perceptible beneath all he said or did, filled me with sensations indescribably wretched. Then suddenly came the thought that if our dear mother were alive and could see him thus, how heart-broken she would be;—and sinking upon a seat, I again burst into a passionate torrent of weeping.

"By the bye, Mary dear," he said, turning suddenly back from the door——"But by jingo! what a silly girl you are! You are always crying. Such tears are enough to put out the brightest eyes in the world. Come, come, cheer up, girl," he went on to say in a coaxing tone. "You were talking about paying my fare back into Kent. Why, that would be a matter of at least three pounds, outside the coach: and as I don't want to go just yet, if you could only lend me the three pounds I will let you have them again when I take my bespeak——that's my benefit, you know."

I drew forth my purse, which contained about four pounds, and at once tendered it to my brother. He lost no time in emptying the contents into the palm of his hand; and his countenance brightened up as he chinked the mingled gold and silver. But it was a brightening of the features that did me harm to see: for the thought was irresistibly forced upon my mind that he only regarded that money as the means of procuring dissipated pleasures.

"You are a good girl, Mary," he said, tossing me back the empty purse; and then bending down, he kissed my cheek in a careless indifferent way, and leisurely sauntered out of the room.

I hurried up to my chamber and for a long time was convulsed with grief.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE DRAMATIC COMPANY.

I NOW pass on to the day previous to my departure from Derby; and about three o'clock in the afternoon I found myself entering the street where, as I had previously ascertained, the tavern at which the strolling company lodged, was situated. It was in one sense with much repugnance that I was about to visit that place; for the estimate I had formed of my brother's companions—particularly from the few remarks he had himself made concerning them—was by no means a high one; and I did not relish the idea of encountering them. But on the other hand, I did not think it right—nor indeed would my feelings permit me—to leave that part of the country without bidding my brother farewell; and perhaps I still entertained a slight hope of being enabled to induce him to accompany me. For from what I had read in the Derby paper, the dramatic speculation of Mr. Tomlinson's troop was a most miserable failure: they had been playing to empty houses; and the critical notice in the journal alluded to, was of a very disparaging character. I therefore fancied it not altogether impossible that my brother might choose to separate himself from this luckless company.

But in case his infatuation should still lead him to abide by the fortunes of his associates, I resolved not to leave him without such pecuniary assistance as I was enabled to afford. I should observe that when my box had been fetched by Captain Calder's servant from Harlesdon Park, it had some little money of mine in it—the fruit of my savings in her ladyship's service: but all that remained to me on the day when my brother called (save and except Captain Calder's twenty pound note) was in the purse the contents of which he had self-appropriated. The reader will remember that I had made up my mind not to change the note, except in circumstances of emergency. This emergency was now present; inasmuch as the wages received from Miss Nibkins being laid out in clothes, I wanted money for my travelling expenses back into Kent, and I also resolved to make Robert a present of five pounds. Alas! I feared that the money would not be well or wisely spent by him: but on the other hand, if he were left without money altogether, might he not have recourse to some evil means to obtain it?

It was with a feeling of despondency that I changed the twenty pound note, which I regarded rather as the memorial of a generous friendship than in the vulgar light of the world's lucre: but having done so, I continued my way towards the tavern at which the dramatic company was located. A sign-board, with a most unshapely object daubed in dingy white and brick-red upon a blue ground, but doubtless intended to represent a shoulder of mutton, was suspended in front of a public-house of mean appearance; and on reaching the threshold, the interior looked so dirty, and I was assailed with such an unpleasant odour of spirituous liquors, onions, and tobacco, that I recoiled in loathing and disgust. However, making up my mind to proceed, I entered the public-house, and inquired at the bar for my

brother by his theatrical name. A slovenly-looking woman, who, it appeared, was the landlady of the place, eyed me with a leer half impudently familiar and half angry: then raising her voice, she cried, "I say, Tibby, here's a young woman as wants one of them players up-stairs which can't settle their reckoning. Go and show her up."

"Aye, aye," growled the savage voice of a man: and the speaker slowly made his appearance from a little room behind the bar. A glance showed me that he was the landlord of the place: for he had on a dirty apron and a sealskin cap, and his appearance was altogether sordid and sottish.

"And I say, Tibby," exclaimed his wife, "you may as well put it to them people again whether they means to settle their score or no; for not so much as a bit of bread-and-cheese or a drop of beer shall go up to their room till they comes down with the ready."

"Aye, aye," responded the landlord. "I'll tackle 'em. This way, Miss."

He conducted me up a staircase without any carpet, and the boards of which were as black as if the chimney-sweeps had been up and down all the morning; and on reaching the first landing, he unceremoniously threw open a door—when the following scene met my view.

Picture to yourself, reader, some twelve or fourteen men and women, all huddled together as it were in a small sitting-room filled with tobacco-smoke—for several of the male members of the troop were puffing away at clay pipes: then conceive these persons for the most part apparelled in a poverty-stricken and indeed wretched manner—the men nevertheless with a certain flashiness about them, and the women with a faded tawdry, all of which only made the shabbiness of their raiment the more ludicrously painful to contemplate;—and as-

sociated with these evidences of worn-out finery, picture to yourself female cheeks wan and ghastly, without their rouge—looks bold and brazen—and a certain air of careworn wretchedness and dissipation pervading all,—and you may form a tolerably correct idea of the scene which thus met my view when the door was thrown open.

"Mary, by Jove!" ejaculated Robert, who, with a long clay pipe in his mouth, was sitting, or rather lounging, next to a young woman round whose neck his arm was carelessly thrown. She had no doubt once been pretty: but her good looks had well nigh faded away, and though she was not perhaps more than three-and-twenty, yet at the first glance she seemed at least ten years older, so hollow were her cheeks and sunken her eyes.

I stepped back a pace or two, recoiling instinctively from the entire scene—while the landlord, passing into the room, said in his gruff savage voice, "Come, I say, Mr. Manager, how's my bill to be paid? Mind you, I don't keep a house for tramps—and I'm blowed if you are much better."

"My dear Mr. Tibby," responded a voice which I at once recognized to be Mr. Reginald Fitzherbert Tomlinson's, although he now spoke in a humble tone, very different from his grandiloquence when he called at Montpellier House,—"don't be too peremptory with us, and we shall make things all right at last. We are holding a consultation now; and if to-night's performance don't turn up a trump card, as we hope and trust it will—why, then we must put some of the theatrical properties up the spout and settle your little chalk for you."

"Properties indeed!" growled Mr. Tibby the landlord: "d'ye call all them tinsel and glass things that you have got with you, properties? Why, there isn't a pawnbroker in the town that will advance a dump upon them."

"Hush, most worthy landlord!" said my brother: "do not betray the nakedness of the land. That's my sister come to see me; and when I think of it, I shouldn't at all wonder if she could help us out of this precious scrape—for she's a good saving girl, she is."

"Well, well," said the landlord, evidently somewhat appeased by the hope thus flung out, "if she's your sister, so much the better—for she does look a respectable young person:"—then turning towards me as I stood back on the landing, he cried, "Come, won't you walk in, Miss? Your brother's here."

"Come along, Mary—it's all right," exclaimed Robert. "You will be welcome, and I shall be proud to introduce you to my sweetheart Miss Araminta Rosina Flummery."

"Can I have a private room for a few minutes to see my brother in?" said I in a low and hurried voice to the landlord. "I will pay you for it."

"To be sure, Miss," he answered quickly, his sottish countenance brightening up: and throwing open another door upon the same landing, he said, "Walk in here, please."

I hastened to enter the little sitting-room thus placed at my disposal; and it was quite a relief to get away from the view which the interior of the adjacent apartment presented. Almost immediately after, Robert joined me there: but he came in smoking his pipe—so that, without any affectation, my heart heaved at the nauseous smell of the tobacco. Shutting the door behind him, he sat down, saying, "Why the deuce wouldn't you come in amongst us? They'll set it down as pride."

"Robert," I said, "do put away that pipe—it makes me sick. Besides, I wish to speak to you very seriously."

"Seriously—botheration! you are always serious!" he exclaimed, petulantly. "If you was a man, one would think you did nothing but play the part of mute at funerals. But tell me, have you got any money, Mary?"

"I have come on purpose to bring you some."

"Then, by jingo! I won't be disagreeable: therefore here goes!"—and he flung the pipe across the room, so that hitting against the opposite wall, it broke into a dozen pieces. "Now, Mary dear, how much money have you brought me?"

"I am going to leave Derby to-morrow, Robert," I said, not immediately answering his question; for I felt both hurt and grieved at the heartless selfishness which he exhibited in his greed to obtain possession of the money I had brought. "Will you accompany me? I know that you and your companions have experienced little success—I have read that in the paper——"

"Ah! but it's through no fault of ours," interrupted my brother, colouring up. "We have the talent, but it's the Derby people that hav'n't the taste:"—and he broke out into a volley of oaths that shocked and terrified me. "Why, what a little fool you are!" he cried, as I besought him not to use such dreadful language: "everything one does is wrong in your opinion. But come, don't keep me in suspense—what about the money?"

"How much do you require to pay the bill of which I heard the landlord speaking?" I asked.

"Why, a beggarly two pound seventeen and tenpence. We have paid as far as we were able: but just because he knows we have had bad houses, he rides rusty. Yet if he had only waited till to-night, he would have no doubt been all right: for I am coming out as *Hamlet;* and if I don't astonish the natives——But never mind. Have you got as much money about you as will pay this wretched bill?"

"I have," was my answer. "But Robert, dear Robert, do for heaven's sake, I conjure you, abandon this life and come with me! You see how wretchedly precarious it is; and what has occurred to-day may happen again next week—when you will have no sister near you," I added with tears in my eyes, "to afford you such little succour as lies in her power."

"Oh, bother take to-morrow—let us only think of to-day! Come, Mary dear, you are doing away with half the kindness of your conduct by keeping me here in suspense. Besides, Araminta I know is dying with anxiety to learn whether you have brought any money or not."

"Robert," I said, with hesitating manner, for I felt ashamed even to touch upon the subject which his words had just recalled to my thoughts; "you spoke ere now of that young woman as if—as if you—you—were engaged to marry her? I hope do not mean to—to——"

"Marry her be hanged!" he ejaculated, bursting out into a coarse laugh. "We are already married as much as we ever shall be."

I could not help comprehending what he meant; and the pain which this new revelation of his depraved conduct caused me, was poignant beyond description. I however said no more upon that

subject,—for it was one which I dared not suffer my thoughts to linger upon: and in order to change the topic at once, I said, "Here are five pounds, Robert: pray do use them economically—make them last you——"

"Five pounds!" he exclaimed, springing from his seat with the most exuberant joy: then snatching up the money which I had just laid upon the table, he darted from the room and rushed into the adjacent one, leaving both the doors wide open, so that I could not help hearing all that now took place. "Hooray, hooray, my hearties!" he shouted, as if mad with delight: "the bill shall be paid, and we will have beefsteaks and fried onions for dinner!"

"No, really though?" ejaculated a female voice, also in accents of joy.

"Yes—really though, my most adorable and best beloved Araminta!" answered Robert: then assuming a theatrical tone, he said, "Thou, as the inimitable Queen of Tragedy, shalt dine to thy heart's contents on fried steaks and onions!"

"With mustard, boy!—and the steaming dishes, too, flanked with foaming pots of heavy wet!" was the majestic addition made by Mr. Reginald Fitzherbert Tomlinson.

"For my part, I can't a-bear inguns," squeaked forth a shrill female voice: "so heggs and bacon for me."

"What! did I hear such ignoble terms come from the coral lips of Miss Euphemia Belinda Granville?" again spoke the sounding voice of the Sole Lessee. "Knew you not, young lady, that fried steaks and onions constitute the sublime in the poetry of the kitchen? and therefore it is a most unpardonable bathos to sink to the ignominious ridicule of eggs and bacon."

"Sheep's heads for me!" now spoke a deep sonorous voice, as if coming from the depths of a subterranean cave.

"This is intolerable!" exclaimed the Manager. "What? thou, the renowned Herbert Godfrey Wilmington, who playest the parts of noble fathers and nabob uncles in domestic dramas, to concentrate thine ideas upon the baseness of a sheep's head! Out upon thee! Say but that same thing again, and never more shalt thou be officer of mine!"

"Put it to the vote, Mr. Tomlinson!" cried numerous voices, male and female.

"Yes—wote, wote!" Miss Euphemia Belinda Granville continued to squeal forth when the general chorus had ceased.

"Be it as ye say," was the Sole Lessee's pompous exclamation. "I will put the amendments first. All those who are in favour of eggs and bacon, hold up one hand! And now against?"—then after a brief pause, Mr. Tomlinson announced that the amendment was lost: after which he proceeded to say, "I do not think, ladies and gentlemen, there can be any necessity to go to a division upon the sheep's heads. I do hope my honourable friend Mr. Herbert Godfrey Wilmington will not waste our valuable time by this factious opposition. Therefore I now proceed to put the fried steaks and onions to the vote."

Here the sonorous voice of Mr. Wilmington sent forth the cavern-like sound of "Shame! shame!"—and some other gentlemen of the troop jumped up and denounced the Manager's conduct as most unparliamentary. Great confusion seemed to ensue, in the midst of which Miss Euphemia Belinda Granville, in revenge for her disappointment respecting the eggs and bacon, thought fit to go into hysterics; and Miss Araminta Rosina Flummery empnatically declared (I regret to say with an oath) that the Sole Lessee's conduct was shameful. She also fearlessly expressed her opinion that Mr. Stanley (meaning my brother) would not be doing his duty unless he knocked the Manager down. The quarrel became general; and great was the disturbance made—in the middle of which the landlord rushed up-stairs, threatening to call in the constables. This menace had the effect of restoring order; and Mr. Tibby was speedily put into very excellent humour by the prompt payment of his bill. The fried steaks and onions were now ordered without any farther dissent; and in a few minutes my brother returned to me in the adjacent room.

Closing the door behind him, he threw himself upon a chair, and bursting out into a hearty laugh, exclaimed, "So you were listening all the time, Mary? Wasn't it a rum go?"

"I could not help overhearing what took place," was my answer; "although I would gladly have been spared the mortification of this additional proof of the strange character of your companions."

"Don't be silly, Mary," replied Robert, his laugh suddenly ceasing, and something like anger appearing in his tone and looks. "It was all in fun, you know; and even if I had punched the Manager's head, as Araminta wanted me to do, it would only have been by way of a lark. But come, you must have dinner with us: they are all dying to know you."

"Robert," I rejoined, "my stay within these walls will not exceed two minutes longer; and therefore, even if I had the inclination, I have not the time to be better acquainted with your friends. Once more I ask, will you return with me into Kent?"

"But how can you pay my fare now after giving me that money?" he at once demanded.

"I will pay your fare, if you will come," was my response.

"Well, hand me over the cash, and tell me when I am to meet you at the coach-office."

"No, Robert—I will not do this. If you choose to accompany me, I will pay your fare at the same time that I pay my own."

"Ah, I understand!" he exclaimed, savagely. "You might just as well tell me your meaning at once: you won't trust me with the money—isn't that it, eh?"

"Do not force me to use language repugnant to my own feelings and humiliating to your's. Once more, Robert," I asked steadily and firmly, "will you leave these people and accompany me?"

"Well then, I won't—and so that's flat," he answered brutally.

"My dear brother, I must now take leave of you," said I, with difficulty keeping back the tears that I felt gushing up from the fountains of my heart. "Do not let us part in anger: we do not know when we may meet again."

"Well, I am sure I don't want to quarrel with you," he said, forcing himself into a sort of good-humour, which however still had a tinge of sullenness in it. "So if you are determined to cut away at once, good bye."

"Good bye, Robert:"—and having embraced

him, I was about to take my departure, when I could not help lingering to beg and implore that he would lead as steady a life as possible: but he cut me short somewhat impatiently, and we parted.

It was with no pleasurable feelings that I left him in that low pot-house and in such company: but I had done my best to get him away with me; and though my efforts had proved so unavailing, I at least had the consolation of having performed my duty. On returning to Montpellier House, I busied myself with packing up my clothes ready for my journey next day; and in that occupation sought as well as I was able to distract my mind from the unpleasant reflections which the position of my brother had conjured up. Presently Mr. and Mrs. Percival, who knew that I was to leave next day, came to see me, and brought me some presents. Ellen likewise seized an opportunity to speak to me alone; and in as delicate a manner as possible, she offered me pecuniary assistance. This however I did not want, and therefore resolutely refused—at the same time expressing my gratitude for my dear friend's kindness. She and her husband both besought me to write to them often, declaring that all they had in the world was at my disposal, and that they never could forget how much they owed me. I assured them that I should ever value their friendship, and would not hesitate to avail myself of it in case of emergency. We then parted—Ellen embracing me affectionately, and Leonard shedding tears as he wrung my hand with cordial warmth.

Early next morning I took my leave of the poor school-girls whom I have already mentioned as remaining at Montpellier House during the holidays; and then I went to the parlour to pay my respects to Miss Nibkins. Putting on her great horn spectacles, she looked at me with grave seriousness; and at length said, "Well, I do not think after all that you are an ill-disposed young woman. You certainly have kept the children's garments in excellent order, and have had the grace of God in your heart. These are great recommendations in your favour; and so I am bound to give you a good character. Here is a written one," she continued, placing a folded note in my hands; "and if any farther reference to me be required, I shall not hesitate to give it. Here are your month's wages, from which however I have deducted half-a-crown for a bason you broke up in the children's dormitory. I hope that you will receive the rest of the money in a spirit of thankfulness—not with an overweening pride to think that you are worthy of such remuneration, but rather with the humiliating conviction that, like all benefits which heaven sends us poor sinners, it is more than you deserve."

I offered no remonstrance against the deduction which Miss Nibkins had made; and it struck me at the moment, by her looks, that my silence on that score was the best reproof that could possibly be offered to her meanness. I then took my leave and proceeded to the coach-office, whence a porter had already come to fetch away my boxes. At nine o'clock I was seated inside the vehicle, which at that hour set off on its journey to London.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SAD TIDINGS FROM ABROAD.

It was past eleven o'clock at night when the coach entered the great metropolis, and proceeded to the *George and Blue Boar*, Holborn; and being much wearied with the long tedious journey, I was glad to retire to bed at once. Besides, I had to rise early on the following morning for the Canterbury coach. I slept soundly till a little past seven, when I was called, and immediately got up; but while I was taking my breakfast—which was brought up to me in my own room—I felt an irresistible inclination to avail myself of this opportunity of being in London to call at Harlesdon House in Grosvenor Square and ascertain if the family were in town. I did not think it at all likely that they had yet come back from the Continent: but I felt it to be almost an imperious duty to make an inquiry upon the point, as it was so necessary to my character to have an explanation with Lady Harlesdon. I accordingly made further inquiries relative to the Canterbury coaches, and to my joy learnt that there was one called the *Tally-Ho* which left London at three o'clock in the afternoon, arriving in the Kentish capital at nine: so I determined to wait for that conveyance, and in the meantime call at Harlesdon House.

I proceeded to Grosvenor Square: but as soon as I came within sight of the well-known mansion, the closed shutters in the lower rooms and the blinds drawn down in the upper ones, convinced me that the family was still absent. I therefore hesitated to call at the house; but a second thought prompted me to do so: for it struck me that if Lord and Lady Harlesdon were still absent, at all events the servants might know when they were expected to return, and thus I should be informed when it would be advisable for me to write a letter of explanations to her ladyship.

I accordingly rang at the front door; and the hall-porter presently answered the summons. He was both surprised and pleased at seeing me; and by his manner I at once saw that neither at the town mansion, any more than at Harlesdon Park, was there the slightest prejudice existing against me among the domestics.

"Well, Mary, how are you after this long time? I am really delighted to see you. And you are looking so well, and have grown such a fine girl too!——As an old man, I may say this: for I always liked you—and there isn't one of us who entertains a different feeling. But come, walk into the parlour here: there's none of the family at home. And by the bye, you have been quite a heroine again down in the country about the Percival affair, as you was here in London when poor little Bella was stolen."

Thus chattering, the hall-porter conducted me into the breakfast-parlour, where all the furniture was covered up in the usual way at great mansions when the families are out of town. We sat down; and he asked me a great number of questions about the transactions in Derbyshire to which he had already alluded. When I had satisfied him—for he was a worthy kind-hearted man—I thought it my turn to become the querist; and accordingly said, "Now tell me where my lord and lady are—when they are coming back—and all you know about them."

"His lordship's 'gentleman' wrote a letter very recently to the steward here, telling him that the family meant to winter in Italy. The letter was dated from Florence: it was very short, and made no farther allusion to her ladyship and the children than that they were all well. But——"

"The family, then, is staying at Florence?" said I.

"Yes, for the present. The steward had orders to write to his lordship there."

"Then you think that if I were to address a letter to her ladyship at Florence, it would reach her?"

"No doubt of it," returned the hall-porter: then after a little hesitation, he added with a sort of mystery in his tone and look, "The upper housemaid here received a few days back a letter from Jemima——You recollect Jemima?"

"How could I forget her? But pray proceed."

"Well, Jemima wrote to the upper housemaid, and I saw the letter," continued the old man, with a deepening sadness upon his countenance. "It appears that her ladyship is very, very unhappy—so changed, so altered, that Jemima says we should hardly know her. For recollect, it is eight or nine months since any of us here at the town-mansion have seen her: because when the family left Harlesdon Park so suddenly, they travelled day and night, passing right through London without stopping, and so going on straight to Dover. That was sharp work—eh?"

"But about her ladyship?" I exclaimed. "Do tell me about my dear mistress, as I must still call her."

"I am sorry to say," continued the old porter, "that Jemima's letter gives very sad accounts. She says that her ladyship appears to be dying slowly but surely, with a breaking heart."

"Dying!—O heavens!" I ejaculated, the tears starting from my eyes.

"It is but too true, from what Jemima says in her letter: and the worst of it is that his lordship does not treat her as he ought to do. But then there may be a cause—there may be a cause," added the old man, shaking his head mournfully. "Of course, Mary, you know what I mean; and if the old lord has really discovered everything, one can scarcely be astonished at his conduct. At the same time, for my part, I don't think it is fair for him to keep on living with his young wife only to teaze and torment her day after day, as he seems to be doing, and thus killing her by slow agonies. If he has positive proof of her infidelity in respect to Sir Aubrey Clavering, he ought to separate from her. However, these are matters on which it little becomes an old man like me to speak to a good and well-principled young girl as you are: but I know that you are deeply interested in our poor mistress, and it's enough to make one's heart bleed to read the shocking accounts that Jemima gives in her letter. I wish the upper housemaid hadn't gone away for a week's holiday: for I would make her show you the letter. But if you are going to stay in London and would call again in a few days——"

"I am compelled to leave this afternoon," was my answer: "for I have nothing to keep me in London, and feel lonely and unprotected at the hotel. But you can tell me all that Jemima says."

"Oh! she goes into a great quantity of details," continued the porter. "It appears that Lord Harlesdon's conduct is not downright rough and brutal: he is too polished a gentleman for *that*: but there are a thousand little ways in which a husband can vent his spite upon his wife—and all this he does. Jemima has sometimes listened to their conversation when they have thought themselves unheard; and on those occasions, as she says, it has made her blood run cold to hear the bitter sarcasms that his lordship levels at our poor mistress, while she on her part prays and beseeches him to spare her. Jemima overheard her say on one occasion, 'Your lordship need not endeavour to hasten my death by this cruel treatment. I feel that I am dying; I know that I am not long for this world: and even though your lordship hates me, as I know you do, and I am sure you must, yet it would be merciful to suffer me to die as peacefully as I may.'—But it does not appear from what Jemima says that this affecting speech did any good with his lordship; but he answered with bitter taunts and seemed to pursue his unhappy wife with a sort of fiendish malignity. I am sorry to make you cry, Mary, with these statements," added the hall-porter, himself profoundly moved; "but you asked me for the particulars, and I have accordingly given them."

I *was* crying—and bitterly too: for the memorable scene in the carriage coming vividly back to my recollection, reminded me but too well how perfect an adept Lord Harlesdon was in thus inflicting the bitterest torments upon his wife.

"Jemima says that she is so unhappy," continued the hall-porter, "she would leave her situation, were it not that Lady Harlesdon asks her to stay, and she has not the heart to disoblige our poor mistress. What will be the end of it I don't know; but Jemima says that she sometimes thinks Lady Harlesdon will be goaded to despair and will do herself a mischief. She tells the housemaid in her letter, that one day, having occasion to make some inquiry of Lady Harlesdon relative to matters regarding the children, she went to her ladyship's chamber, and entering perhaps somewhat more abruptly than she ought, beheld her unhappy mistress on her knees giving vent to the wofullest lamentations. And when I think of what Jemima goes on to say," continued the hall-porter, "I remember that she heard her ladyship on that occasion mentioning your name——"

"My name?" I ejaculated, with a start caused by a sudden pang.

"Yes—and to tell you the truth, Mary," added the hall-porter, "from what Jemima says, Lady Harlesdon fancies that it was not altogether against your own consent that you was carried off when at the Park."

"Ah! this is indeed what I feared—or rather what I knew to be the case!" I exclaimed, much hurt and deeply affected. "But you——"

"Oh! none of us here believe any harm against you," at once replied the hall-porter, anticipating my question. "We know you too well for that: and if I thought you was a bad girl, you and I should not be talking in so friendly a manner at this moment. Jemima too tells the housemaid in her letter that she has said as much as she could and gone as far as she dared, to convince her ladyship that you are all that you seem: but it appears that her ladyship invariably cuts short the conversation if ever Jemima mentions your name."

"Poor Jemima! I always knew that she possessed a good heart. I will write to her such a letter that she can show to Lady Harlesdon and which will

explain anything in my conduct that may seem calculated to prejudice her ladyship against me."

"Do so, Mary: I am glad to hear that such is your intention. And now, will you walk down to the servants' hall and see your late fellow-servants there? They will be delighted to shake you by the hand."

I accordingly passed half-an-hour with the domestics in the servants' hall, and at the expiration of that interval had much trouble in getting away from them, so kind and pressing were their invitations to stop and pass the remainder of the day with them. But I wished to get back to the tavern, so as to employ the rest of the time until the departure of the coach in writing a long letter to Jemima. Taking my leave, therefore, of the servants at Harlesdon House, I began to retrace my way to Holborn; and had reached St. Giles's Church, when I suddenly beheld a well-known female figure walking rapidly on in front. This was the Gipsy Queen—the cause of all the calumny that had been levelled against me in respect to Sir Aubrey Clavering, and to wipe the impression of which away from Lady Harlesdon's mind I was hastening back to the tavern to pen a long letter to Jemima in Florence.

She was dressed in a dark stuff gown, with a handkerchief upon her head; and her fine figure moved on, majestic and stately as if she felt all the consciousness of a real queenly rank. Her sudden appearance struck me as something providential. It was in her power so effectually to clear up the origin of the calumny that not even the most prejudiced mind could refuse to yield to the conviction which her testimony might establish; and obeying the sudden impulse of my thoughts, I bounded after her and caught her by the arm.

"Ah!" she ejaculated on instantaneously recognizing my countenance. "You wish to speak to me? I see that you do: and I can guess for what."

"Yes—it is most important," was my rapid response. "You can make atonement for all the ill you have done me."

"I will then," she at once replied; and there was an expression of sincerity in her large black eyes. "To-night at nine o'clock meet me here."

"I cannot. I am to start for Canterbury at three——"

"Then we shall not meet at all. I cannot make my time your's. You must make your's mine:"—and with this peremptory answer, she was walking rapidly away.

I hesitated for a moment what course to adopt. Why not wait a few hours longer than I had originally intended in London, for the purpose of achieving so important an end? My hesitation vanished: I was decided how to act. Again speeding after the Gipsy Queen, I caught her by the arm, saying, "I will meet you, then, in front of St. Giles's Church at nine this evening."

"Good!" she calmly observed without even turning round or stopping; and immediately crossing the street, she disappeared in one of those wretched lanes which at that period constituted the rookery of St. Giles's.

I hastened on to the *George and Blue Boar;* and speeding up to my bed-chamber, sat down and commenced my letter to Jemima. But I had not written many lines when it struck me that if I addressed my explanations to Jemima—especially with regard to the scene on horseback with the Gipsy Queen, when she was disguised as Sir Aubrey Clavering—it would be positively revealing to Jemima her ladyship's amour with the Baronet, because it would show that the whole had been a plot to madden her ladyship with jealousy: and although it was clear that this amour was even more than suspected by the dependants of the family, it would be altogether unjustifiable of me to say anything which might confirm that suspicion. I therefore resolved to address my letter to Lady Harlesdon, but to enclose it in one to Jemima, so as to make sure that it would not be intercepted by his lordship. Then I recollected that I had still in my box the letter which I had written to her ladyship when I was at Captain Calder's, and which had been brought back from Harlesdon Park by the messenger who had taken it thither at the time. So I had now merely to write a letter to Jemima, stating how I had learnt that the family was in Florence, and begging her to deliver secretly to her ladyship the packet which was to be enclosed in her own. But I did not seal either letters, as I hoped that my interview with the Gipsy Queen would enable me to add something of importance to the explanations already addressed to Lady Harlesdon.

Having taken some dinner in the afternoon, I borrowed a newspaper to while away the time until the hour of my appointment, as I did not choose to walk about London by myself; and having read all that seemed interesting, I was about to fling the paper aside, when my eye suddenly caught a name which made me start in consequence of the place where it occurred. The reader may believe how sincere was my grief when under the head of BANKRUPTS, I read the following announcement:—

John Obadiah Messiter, Dover, Grocer and Tea-Dealer; to surrender July 16th and August 19th, at one o'clock, at the Bankruptcy Court. Solicitor, Mr. Rigden, Dover: Official Assignee, Mr. Jackson, Clements Lane, London.

Poor Mrs. Messiter! how deeply, deeply did I feel for her;—and as I remembered that I had not written to her for a long time, I was struck with a species of remorse at this apparent neglect. But the reader, who knows how continuously I was occupied at Montpellier House, will not blame me for an omission which had really arisen from downright want of time, and not from wilful negligence. However, to remove as much as possible all cause for self-reproach, I at once took up my pen and wrote her an affectionate letter, wherein, without absolutely alluding to what I had just read in the newspaper, I suffered her to perceive that I had learnt her misfortune and profoundly sympathized with her. Oh! if I had possessed a few hundred pounds at that moment I should have lost no time in transmitting them to the poor woman: but it was useless to wish for what there seemed no earthly chance of obtaining; and therefore I had naught but commiseration to offer. I stated in my letter that I should very soon be at Ashford, and hoped to find an answer lying for me at the Post Office there.

Having despatched this letter to the post, I took my tea, and amused myself with one of the few books I possessed until it was near nine o'clock. I then went forth, and with a beating heart bent my way towards the vicinage of St. Giles's Church. I

was much too soon; and not to attract attention by standing still in the street, I retraced my way a little. The blaze of light in a jeweller's shop attracted my gaze; and with the listless manner of one who seeks to kill time when waiting an appointment, I stopped and looked in at the window. To my astonishment, one of the very first articles which rivetted my gaze was the ring which I had received as a present from Lady Harlesdon!

The reader will remember that I had left it upon the chest of drawers or the toilet-table, in my chamber at the White Cottage, on that memorable night when the burglarious entrance of the Bulldog and his companions had effected my deliverance. I had often regretted the loss of that ring; and the moment I was convinced, by a closer scrutiny, that the one I now saw exposed for sale, *was* the identical gift of Lady Harlesdon, I entered the shop. On inquiring the price, I was told by the master serving behind the counter, that it was three guineas. This was a large sum for me to part with; and seeing that I hesitated, he at once said that I might have it for two guineas. The idea struck me that he himself could not have come very honestly by it—or, in plain terms, that he must have bought it very cheap, knowing it to have been stolen—thus to be enabled to diminish his price so abruptly. As this thought entered my mind, my looks were suddenly rivetted by other objects: for there, in a glass case, and amidst an immense quantity of beautiful things, were some, if not all of the very articles of jewellery which I had seen in the cupboard at the White Cottage, and which Sir Aubrey Clavering had purchased for my use. The shopkeeper could have seen by my manner that I was amazed on observing those articles there; and as I raised my looks, which must have been full of suspicion, to his countenance, he seemed to grow troubled.

"Beautiful things, Miss—very beautiful things," he said, endeavouring to veil his confusion under the appearance of tradesman-like urbanity and bustle. "Can I tempt you with anything in addition to the ring, Miss?"

"The ring is my own," I answered quietly; "and here, if you look inside the hoop, you will see the name of *Mary Price*. That is my name—as I can shortly prove, if necessary."

"Very likely, Miss—very likely," said the jeweller, with evident uneasiness. "But I bought it in the regular way of business."

"At all events," said I, "you will let me have it for exactly what you gave."

"Well, Miss, I won't be hard upon you, since you say it is your own——But, was it stolen from you?"

"Not exactly stolen from me, because I left it behind me somewhere under circumstances of great haste: but it has evidently been self-appropriated by those who had no right to it."

"Well, Miss, I don't doubt your word. We tradesmen, you know, who buy as well as sell, are liable to these sort of things. Let me see," he added, pretending to reflect, though I saw that he was eyeing me askance the whole time; "I think I gave thirty shillings for the ring: you can't object to give me the same?"

Nor did I: but at once taking out my purse, paid the sum thus asked, and with much satisfaction regained possession of my ring.

"I can't tempt you then with any of these beautiful articles?" said the jeweller, looking down upon the glass case.

"I have seen them all before," was my response: and now I observed that the shopkeeper grew very pale.

I was turning to quit the place when he said, "But, Miss, one word if you please. You were not robbed also—that is to say, you didn't leave behind you any other things at the same time as that ring? Because if you did, sooner than have any bother or trouble about it, I—I—would rather put up with a loss—and—and——"

"No—those things never belonged to me," I answered; "although I have seen them before: and that they were stolen from the place where I thus saw them, I do happen to know."

Thereupon I quitted the shop; and as I retraced my way towards the front of St. Giles's church, I thought to myself, "There is a man who evidently deals in stolen goods. And yet he doubtless calls himself a respectable tradesman, and is looked upon as such by his neighbours. Perhaps he can hold his head as high as any of them, and walks to church on a Sunday with as complacent a mien as the most honest of the congregation. Oh! the respectable aspects under which vice and villany hide themselves!"—and then as I reflected upon this jeweller's evident rascalities, I could not help thinking of Mr. Messiter's adulterations. The latter had not saved him from the Bankruptcy Court; yet on the other hand it was far from unlikely that the jeweller whom I had just quitted kept his suburban villa and rode in his carriage.

By the time I reached the iron gate leading into St. Giles's churchyard, I found that the Gipsy Queen was waiting for me; and in the clear twilight I immediately saw that her countenance was more than usually grave and serious.

"Step aside with me for a moment," she said, "ere we proceed to the place where we can talk together:"—then drawing me out of the public street into some obscure nook, she observed, "Mary Price, you wish to converse with me relative to that adventure in which I played a part—is it not so?"

"Yes: I wish you to make me such atonement as lies in your power."

"I will," she at once replied: "I told you so this morning. It is for that purpose I am here now. But in the meantime you must render me a little service."

"What is it?" I asked, in considerable astonishment.

"Put no questions, but do as I bid you. In the first place take this money in your hand and this slip of paper."

"No," said I, fearful of treachery. "I cannot—I dare not embark in anything shrouded in mystery."

"Foolish girl! there is no danger," exclaimed the Gipsy Queen angrily. "If you are not willing to serve me, I can do nothing to serve you. Besides, my time is precious, and I cannot wait."

"But what do you require me to do?"

"Follow me," was the imperious answer; and the Gipsy Queen passed on in front.

Unwilling to renounce the opportunity of obtaining what I required from her, I obeyed her command—for such indeed it was: and in a few minutes she suddenly stopped, thrust a sovereign and the slip of paper into my hand, and pointing to a che-

mist's shop, said, "Go in there. It is merely a doctor's prescription I want to have made up."

This last incident took place so suddenly that it threw me as it were into a confusion which led me to obey mechanically; and I entered the chemist's shop. But the moment I crossed the threshold all my presence of mind returned; and the suspicion flashed to my brain that it was possible I was being made the instrument of purchasing some poison for the most dreadful of uses. I was however in the shop—the chemist behind the counter was waiting to serve me—and it was too late to retreat. So I handed him the paper, saying, "If this prescription is quite harmless, I wish it made up—but not unless."

"Harmless?" exclaimed the chemist, in astonishment at the singularity of my remark. "What! do you think a respectable physician, such as the person is who has signed this prescription, would order anything pernicious? But the invalid for whom it is intended, must be very, very ill."

"Please then," said I, now completely reassured, "make up the prescription as soon as possible."

The chemist, who was evidently a man of few words, proceeded to comply with my request; and in about five minutes he presented me with a bottle enveloped in paper, and for which he charged five shillings. I thanked him—took the bottle and the change—and quitting the shop, rejoined the Gipsy Queen, who was waiting for me at a little distance along the street. I gave her the bottle; but she said, "Keep the change: you have got something else to buy."

She then walked rapidly on, I following close behind. In about five minutes she paused opposite a pastry-cook's shop; and pointing to a large jelly which was displayed in its mould in the window, she said, "Go in and purchase that. You can leave a deposit for the mould, which will be returned in a day or two."

I saw not the slightest harm in complying with this request, and accordingly entered the shop. The jelly was five shillings, and a deposit of half-a-crown was required for the copper mould. The female who served behind the counter enveloped the purchase carefully in paper, and I issued forth from the shop again. The Gipsy Queen took the parcel, and still bidding me follow her, walked on.

In a few more minutes she again stopped; and this time it was opposite a ready-made linen warehouse. Putting another sovereign into my hand, she hastily enumerated several articles of linen that she required, and which belonged to the male toilet: these she instructed me to enter the shop and purchase. Again considering the request to be harmless, and being willing to oblige her in order that she might the more readily serve me in my turn, I entered the shop: but while the assistant who served was looking out the things I asked for, the suspicion suddenly flashed to my mind that in all these proceedings it was possible I was being made an instrument for passing bad money. I turned pale at the thought, and at once examined the second sovereign which the Gipsy Queen had placed in my hands. So far as I could judge, it was undoubtedly a good one. Besides, it instantly occurred to me that if such were her vile object she would not have suffered me to go and expend at the pastry-cook's seven-and-sixpence of the good money received in change from the chemist for the first sovereign. My fears accordingly vanished on this score; and when the present purchase was concluded and I tendered the sovereign in payment, the assistant as he rang it upon the counter was perfectly satisfied with the coin. The parcel came to fifteen or sixteen shillings—I forget exactly how much: and I returned to the Gipsy Queen, who was waiting outside.

"Now," she said, as she received that parcel and likewise all the change I had in my hand out of both sovereigns, "you have performed everything I require, and I will do what you want in return. Follow me."

We retraced our way towards St. Giles's, from which we had diverged in visiting the shops where the above-named purchases were made: but I felt rather alarmed when the Gipsy Queen plunged as it were into that horrid maze of lanes, courts, and alleys which on a former occasion I had threaded in company with Mad Tommy. Still I did not choose to show signs of fear—much less refuse to proceed any farther. The Gipsy Queen went on, I following her accordingly. The twilight of the summer evening might have perhaps not as yet yielded to obscurity in the more open streets; but here, in this maze, the gloom deepened rapidly, so that in a very few minutes I completely lost all knowledge of the course in which I was being led. In fact, I was now in a labyrinth whence, if left to myself, I should not know the readiest means of issue. Up one alley, down another—now to the right, then to the left—then plunging through a court fetid with the close and sultry atmosphere, to emerge at the other extremity into a fresh series of lanes and alleys,—thus did we proceed for a quarter of an hour. At the expiration of that interval the Gipsy Queen stopped suddenly at a house of wretched appearance, so far as I could possibly judge in the obscurity of a court where it was situated. Lights gleamed from the dingy windows, as if seen through a mist; and the air of the place was stifling with the heat as well as nauseating with sickly odours.

"Now you are in the heart of the Holy Land," said the Gipsy Queen: and smiling for the first time since we had met on this occasion, her bright red lips revealed her two rows of magnificent teeth.

"The Holy Land?" said I inquiringly.

"Yes—that is the flash name for this part of St. Giles's," she answered. "The *Tramper's Arms*, where you and I first met," she added with a significant look, "is farther on in that direction:"—and she glanced behind over her shoulder.

While these few words were being exchanged between us, she had knocked at the door, which was speedily opened by the old Norwood Gipsy, the Queen's mother; and I was desired to enter the house. For a moment I hesitated. All within the passage was dark as pitch: the old woman had brought no light with her—and it was only in the dim obscurity that I had recognized her person. What treachery might not be intended me? what desperate characters might not that house contain? The Gipsy Queen, doubtless comprehending my fears, made a gesture of impatience, saying, "Come in or go away again, just as you like: but I swear that no harm is intended you."

I summoned all my fortitude to my aid, and entered the house, the old woman at once closing the front door.

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CHAPTER XLVII.

PALMISTRY.

I WAS not detained many moments in the dark: for the old Norwood Gipsy, entering a room on the same floor, promptly reappeared with a candle. Both going in and coming out of that room, she closed the door behind her: but during the few instants it opened on each occasion, I heard voices speaking in a strange kind of flash or slang language, which I could not understand.

"And so you have brought Miss Mary with you—eh?" said the old woman to her daughter, while she bent a simpering glance upon me.

"Yes—you see I have," responded the Gipsy Queen. "But how is *he* now?" she asked significantly, at the same time glancing upward as if in allusion to some one up-stairs.

"Just the same—just the same," answered the old woman. "But I see you have got all the things. How did you manage?"—and as she put this question her look grew suddenly grave and serious.

"Mary Price was kind enough to purchase everything for me," answered the Gipsy Queen, "and I will do her a service in return. But lead the way, mother, as you have got the light in your hand."

The old crone accordingly bustled up a ricketty staircase, the boards and bannisters of which were black with dust, and the walls were of an equally sooty appearance. I followed next; and the Gipsy Queen brought up the rear. In this manner we ascended two flights; and on the second storey the old woman took the parcels from her daughter,—the latter now taking possession of the candle, and leading me into a room whither the old crone did not follow us. I therefore concluded—particularly as I heard another door open and shut on the same landing—that she had gone to take the medicine, the

jelly, and the new linen into a chamber where some invalid was lying.

The room into which the Gipsy Queen had introduced me, was not altogether so miserably furnished as what I had previously seen of the house might have led me to suppose. There was a good bed, with yellow stuff curtains: a table, with writing-materials and a few books, stood upon a piece of carpet in the middle of the chamber: half-a-dozen chairs, a chest of drawers, a washing-stand, a box the open lid of which revealed wearing apparel, and a small looking glass over the mantle, completed the appointments of the room. But I must observe that amongst the books upon the table, was a large one nearly of the size of a church-bible, which lay open; and as the Gipsy Queen placed the candle upon the table, my looks mechanically fell upon that volume. It contained no print; but the two pages, which were thus exposed, were filled with written entries, apparently of names ranged in alphabetical order and with annotations or particulars attached to each. The Gipsy Queen smiled as she saw me regard the volume; and closing it—but not in a rude manner nor with any degree of abruptness—she said, "Pardon me, but that is our register, and it is sacred."

"It is I who should ask your forgiveness," was my observation, "for having suffered my eyes even for an instant to linger upon its contents. But I can assure you that I read nothing which dwells in my memory."

"It is of no consequence," answered the Gipsy Queen. "The volume is, as I told you, a register of thousands of families in or about the metropolis, with such particulars as we have gleaned concerning them. And perhaps," she added, another smile displaying her white teeth, of which she was evidently proud, "I and my sisterhood are at times as much indebted to the contents of this volume, as to our power of penetrating the future, when we tell fortunes. You are a sensible girl, Mary Price; and therefore I do not mind speaking thus to you."

"I thank you for this mark of confidence," said I. "And now if you will accord me another, it will ease my mind of that misgiving which, though very faint, still lingers vaguely and dimly there."

"To what do you allude?" she asked, taking a chair near the one where I had already seated myself.

"I mean, why was it that you just now asked me to purchase all those articles for you?"

"Because," responded the Gipsy Queen,—and her countenance at once grew grave and solemn, as I had noticed it to be at the moment when I had encountered her opposite St. Giles's Church at nine o'clock,—"because this is the anniversary of a memorable day with the Gipsy or Zingari tribe. It is a day rendered thus memorable by the death, three hundred years ago, of a king who was the founder of the family to which I belong; and we are forbidden by our customs and our laws to enter any shop or mart of commerce, transact any business in the shape of buying or selling, or even pursue our regular avocations of fortune-telling. Now, as you have doubtless already understood, there is an invalid beneath this roof, and it became imperiously necessary to procure certain things in the shape of medicine for his restoration, jelly for his sustenance, and linen for his comfort. Under these circumstances I made use of you."

"I am glad you have given me this explanation," I said, at once assured by its probability. "And now permit me to remind you that from the first moment we met to-day I have not shown you the slightest ill-will on account of the dreadful treachery in which you bore a part last January. Such a demeanour on my side, added to the service which you admit I have rendered you this evening, will probably induce you to make the fullest atonement—the only atonement you *can* make—for the wrong you have done me—especially as I suppose that you have not now any particular interest in serving Sir Aubrey Clavering."

"Not at all," answered the Gipsy Queen. "I care no more for him than for any other person who, having required some particular succour at my hand, has received the service and paid me my wage. Now then, tell me, Mary Price, in what manner I can aid you."

"You are aware," said I, "that by personating the character of Sir Aubrey Clavering, you gave rise to the most injurious reports respecting my reputation. I therefore wish that you would pen a few lines upon a piece of paper, so as to constitute a sort of certificate of my innocence,—admitting that you yourself, disguised as Sir Aubrey Clavering, were the person that figured on horseback on the occasion referred to."

"It was something of this sort that I expected you would require at my hands," answered the Gipsy Queen; "and I have no objection to do as you suggest—provided that no evil use will be made of the document?"

"That I can safely promise. My reputation has long ago been completely cleared up in Derbyshire; and none whose ears the calumny reached in that county can believe it now. But it is to satisfy Lady Harlesdon, who is in Florence, that I desire the certificate."

"You shall have it, with much pleasure on my part," rejoined the Gipsy Queen: then in a tone of sincerity which, whether real or assumed, touched me at the time, she went on to say, "I have often repented of the part I performed in that stratagem: for there is really something admirable and excellent in your character, Mary Price. I could not help admiring you for the heroism displayed in the adventure at the *Tramper's Arms*: but still my admiration was not great enough to prevent me from receiving the heavy bribe which Sir Aubrey Clavering offered for the part that I was to play down in the country last January. Since then, however, the affair of the trial at Derby took place; and when I read it all in the newspapers, I said to my mother that I really felt some degree of remorse at having become instrumental in persecuting a young creature of such fine spirit and generous qualities as yourself. Therefore you see that my disposition towards you has been greatly improved by the influence of your own heroism. Not that I ever disliked you—on the contrary I rather liked you than otherwise, as I have just now said: but since the Derby affair I have taken a positive liking to you, and would not injure you again for worlds. To conclude a long speech, let me assure you that it is with pleasure I am about to give you this certificate; and I hope you will forgive me for the past?"

"Yes—with the utmost sincerity," I replied: "and here is my hand."

She took it—pressed it with every appearance of

cordial warmth—and then, still retaining it, she began to examine the lines on the palm: for I had taken off my glove, thinking that I might have to write out the certificate which she would perhaps sign. When I saw that she was about to exercise the art of palmistry with me, I endeavoured to draw back my hand: for I need not tell the reader that I was very far from having any faith in fortune-telling; and even if I had previously experienced the slightest tendency that way, my credulity would have been destroyed by the sort of confession which the Gipsy Queen herself had just now made in respect to the contents of her huge volume.

"Do not withdraw your hand for a moment," she said, grasping my wrist somewhat forcibly so as to retain it: and fearful of offending her, I allowed her to keep possession of my hand. Drawing the candle close to the edge of the table, she continued to examine my palm with deep, scrutinizing, and earnest looks,—her countenance becoming exceedingly grave and solemn. As she thus bent towards me I could not help admiring the handsome person of this very fine full-grown woman. It has already been said in an earlier chapter that her hair was of extraordinary blackness; but it was of the blackness which has no gloss; and like a frame of ebony did it encase the oval of her dusky-complexioned countenance. Her brows were strongly pencilled and majestically arching: her nose was a fine aquiline—her upper lip short and well cut—her chin somewhat large and prominent, thus completing the Roman outline of her features. Her neck was long and had a graceful curve: her figure was very grandly modelled; and altogether she was an exceedingly handsome woman. Methought, too, that notwithstanding the treacheries in which she had been engaged on the two first occasions of our meeting—namely, the stealing of little Bella, and the affair down in the country—that she was not unsusceptible of generous emotions, though these might be triumphed over by the ardent love of gold which beyond all doubt characterized her: but if left to her natural course it struck me that the Gipsy Queen was quite capable of good, humane, and even elevated actions.

But all the while I was surveying her thus attentively, and giving way to these reflections, she continued to study my palm with an interest which, whether real or feigned, appeared to engross her. She took her pen from the table, and with the top of the feather-end slowly traced the course of several of the minuter lines, especially where they happened to meet or cross each other. This lasted for two or three minutes; and I was getting wearied of what I considered to be a solemn mockery;—but still fearing to offend her, and thus probably defeat the grand object for which I had stayed in London and had suffered myself to be led to this den, I did not withdraw my hand.

"Your palm, Mary Price," at length spoke the Gipsy Queen, in a serious voice, "is full of intricate lines. As the eye follows them the sight soon becomes entangled as it were in a bewildering maze; and your's is not a destiny easy to read. That there are cross-lines predictive of sorrows and misfortunes there can be no doubt: but on the other hand, it is equally certain that there are lines which indicate happiness and joy. The difficulty, however, is to ascertain how long your evil star may be in the ascendant, or how soon the tide of good fortune may set in favourably to your career. Ah!" she suddenly ejaculated, "I now decipher something! A day is approaching—it is not many months distant—which will decide materially in favour either of your happiness or misery. There are lines here which indicate the month of November; and judging by your age, which I can pretty well guess," she added, raising her eyes, "it must be the November of the present year!"

"Enough!" I exclaimed, now abruptly withdrawing my hand; for I was positively startled by the latter portion of the woman's speech, as the reader will suspect it was indeed true that a particular day in the approaching month of November must exercise, by what it would bring forth, an important influence on the happiness of my after-existence.

A strange whirl of thoughts now rushed through my brain. How could the Gipsy Queen have possibly acquired even the remotest inkling of the understanding to which I had come with Eustace Quentin? On my part the only persons in the world to whom I had whispered the circumstance, were Captain and Mrs. Calder; and they had gone abroad immediately afterwards. Eustace himself was not likely to have mentioned it: how then could it be possibly known to the Gipsy Queen? No mere random guess on her part could have brought her so near the truth. It was from a tolerably accurate knowledge, and not from conjecture only, that she had spoken. Unless, indeed, there were something more truthful in the alleged science of palmistry than I had ever before believed!—but to this last hypothesis I could not bring myself to incline.

"You see that the Gipsy's art is not altogether an imposture?" she observed in a quiet manner, as if merely contemplating a triumph in divination to which she was too much accustomed to be at all elated by it.

"Tell me, I conjure you," said I, "how you were enabled to utter the words which you ere now spoke?"

"It is useless, Mary Price, for you to question me," she responded. "If I tell you that the occult study of palmistry is indeed a science as true, as certain, and as much subject to certain laws as astronomy or chemistry themselves, you will not believe me: and if I pretend to have derived my information from other and more vulgar sources, you would feel hurt that I do not explain them. Let us then at once change the conversation: and now for this certificate."

Thus speaking, the Gipsy Queen opened a portfolio, and began writing upon a sheet of paper with a fluency, an elegance, and an accuracy that, as I followed what she wrote, filled me with surprise. The hand itself was truly ladylike—the orthography was faultless—and the language in which she worded the document was exceedingly good. This last point did not astonish me; inasmuch as on all occasions I had observed that when she spoke her phraseology was unexceptionably correct. To the certificate which she thus drew up, and which embodied all the particulars that were necessary to elucidate the whole transaction to which it referred, she appended her name, which I now learnt for the first time. It was *Barbauld Azetha*—the latter being the surname, and, as she casually mentioned to me, of Egyptian origin.

"Now, Mary Price," she said, as she presented me with the certificate, "I have made such atonemen

for the past as lies in my power. And you forgive me?"

"I do," was my reply: "and I thank you sincerely into the bargain."

"Where are you staying in London?" she asked, as I rose from my seat. "If it be far from hence, I must send my mother to accompany you: but if it be near, I will go with you myself."

I told her the tavern at which I was staying, adding that all I required was to be conducted safe out of the labyrinth of incomprehensible lanes and alleys forming this district of St. Giles's; and she volunteered to accompany me to the outskirts of the Holy Land.

"It was a strange coincidence which led to your rescue from the White Cottage—was it not?" she asked, as she drew on a dark cloak. "The villany of Sawbridge and his friends was your salvation, poor girl, upon that occasion."

"Do you know," I asked, "what has become of Sir Aubrey Clavering?"

"I have only seen him once since the transactions of last January," replied the Gipsy Queen; "and that was about two months ago, at Norwood, the habitual home of my mother and myself. He bitterly deplored having allowed his man Morley to have the conduct of that affair; inasmuch as such a villain as Sawbridge was thereby brought into it. Ah! now I remember too," added the Gipsy Queen, "he gave me a printed bill relative to the jewels which were stolen upon the occasion of the burglary. Stop a moment! I think I can show it you. I remember seeing it this very morning. Yes—here it is."

As she thus spoke, the Gipsy Queen took from amongst the papers in her portfolio a handbill offering a reward of three hundred guineas to any one who would give information which might lead to the discovery of where certain jewels, to the value of twelve hundred guineas, had been disposed of; and it was directed, at the foot of the bill, that all applications upon the subject should be addressed to Mr. Crosby, Solicitor, Furnival's Inn, London.

I was about to explain to the Gipsy Queen how I myself had that very evening discovered where the jewels alluded to at that moment where; but a sudden idea struck me, and I held my peace. However marked well the name and address of the solicitor to whom applications were to be made.

"Now," said I, returning her the handbill which I had just perused, "I will take my departure; for it must be growing late, and it will not appear seemly for me to remain away from the tavern"

But scarcely had I thus spoken, when the sudden and violent opening of a door on the same landing as the room where the present interview was taking place, caused me to start; and the noise was immediately followed by the voice of the old Norwood Gipsy, exclaiming angrily and impatiently, "Come back, Graham—come back, I say—immediately!"

"What does all this signify?" ejaculated the Gipsy Queen, hastening towards the door of the chamber.

But ere she reached it, it was thrown violently open; and a form, ghastly pale and apparently enveloped in the white garments of the grave, appeared upon the threshold. Merciful heavens! could it be possible?—was it indeed the countenance *of my own father* which I thus beheld?

I remember that I gave vent to my feelings of mingled terror and amazement in a loud scream; and then all consciousness abandoned us.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

FRESH BUSINESS IN LONDON.

WHEN I came to myself again I was lying in my bed at the *George and Blue Boar* Tavern. A light was burning in the room; and the Gipsy Queen was bending over me. The spectral image which I had seen at the house in St. Giles's instantaneously rose up in my mind; and I asked with wild and feverish impatience, "Who was the person that terrified me so?"

"He is one of our tribe, and his name is Graham," was the Gipsy Queen's answer.

"I adjure you to tell me truly what I am going to ask you!" said I. "How long has he been with you? how long have you known him?"

"Ever since I was a child," was the Gipsy Queen's response.

I looked at her steadily in the face, as the light of the candle threw its beams upon her: but there was nothing in her demeanour to justify me in suspecting that she was telling an untruth.

"This is strange—most strange!" said I, utterly bewildered, and not knowing what to think.

"What is it that fills you with doubt and misgiving?" asked the Gipsy Queen. "I can well understand that the hideous appearance of that poor invalid, quitting his couch in the delirium of fever, and bursting in with a sheet wrapped round him, was enough to overwhelm you with terror. But now methinks, by the questions you have put, there must be some strange impression on your mind?"

"There is, there is," I answered, still tortured by the cruellest doubts. "Oh! if you knew all——"

"Calm yourself, Mary Price," said the Gipsy Queen. "Whatever questions you choose to put to me, I will faithfully and frankly reply to: for it is clear that there is some strange thought in your imagination relative to that individual. Did you think you knew him? did you take him for anybody you had ever seen before?"

I did not immediately answer the question; but closing my eyes, gave way to the most serious thoughts. How was it possible that my father could be living?—were not the circumstances of his death but too well established at the time? The blood-stains on the river's bank—the deep trace in the grass, showing that the body had gone down there into the water,—and then the knife that was picked up, also stained with blood,—had not these evidences but too clearly proved that my unfortunate parent had committed self-destruction? And yet, on the other hand, that countenance which I had seen at the house in St. Giles's, ghastly and disfigured though it were by suffering and sickness, bore so striking a resemblance to my father's features that it was no wonder if the effect of the sudden apparition had proved so overpowering!

Still pursuing my reflections, I thought to myself that if my parent were indeed alive he would not have so long deserted the children whom he so dearly loved. Suppose that he had attempted suicide—suppose that he had slid down or dragged himself into the river—and suppose that he eventually escaped both from the self-inflicted wound

and from a watery grave,—what earthly reason was there to prevent him from returning to his children and his home? No: all things considered, I was compelled to arrive at the conclusion that an extraordinary resemblance between the invalid Graham and my poor self-destroyed father, must be the real solution of the mystery—and indeed the only rational way to account for it.

Opening my eyes again, I said to the Gipsy Queen, "Three years have elapsed since my father was believed to perish under circumstances which, if they were not altogether conclusive as to his unhappy fate, could leave but the smallest doubt concerning it. Indeed, I never did entertain any doubt at all—much less the faintest scintillation of a hope that he could yet be a denizen of this world—until to-night."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Gipsy Queen. "Poor girl!—and you fancied that man to be your father?"

"The likeness is most extraordinary," I answered. "But you tell me—you assure me—that the man's name is Graham, and that you have known him for many long years?"

"Positively and solemnly do I give you these assurances," replied Barbauld Azetha, the Gipsy Queen. "But if you have any farther doubt upon the subject, you can return to-morrow to the house in the Holy Land, and see that individual: then, on a closer scrutiny of his features, you will be convinced of the truth of what I tell you. At the same time," she added, drawing herself up in a dignified manner, "when once I have bestowed my friendship upon a fellow-creature as I have upon you, it were impossible for me to use deception towards the object of such a sentiment."

I was satisfied—and now felt completely assured that the coincidence of an extraordinary likeness had deceived me.

"No," I said, "I will not insult you—I will not wound your feelings—after the demonstrations of good-will you have this night shown towards me,—I will not, I say, prove suspicious or mistrustful by visiting that invalid. And now tell me under what circumstances I was brought hither."

"When you fell down in a sudden swoon, the invalid became frightened, and sped back to his couch of his own accord: my mother and I were therefore both enabled to devote our attentions to you. But you were in a faint so deep—in a trance so deathlike—that we became alarmed; and our first thought was to send for a doctor. But it instantaneously struck me that it might compromise your reputation if a medical man were fetched to attend upon you at a house in the very heart of St. Giles's: for such strange things happen in this world, that there could be no saying how he might meet you again in after life. I accordingly resolved to bear you away to the tavern, the name of which you had happened to mention to me in the course of conversation. Still, however, anxious to avoid compromising you to the utmost of my power, I hastily made such alterations in my dress as effectually to conceal my gipsy-appearance; and assuming the garb of a respectable middle-class woman, with a veil over my countenance, I helped my mother to carry you to a hackney-coach which we sent for, and which was brought into a neighbouring street. You still continued in a swoon; and in this state I brought you to the tavern. A few hasty words to the chamber-maid averted anything like unpleasant suspicion. I stated that I was a shopkeeper's wife living at no great distance—that you had been to pass the evening with me, along with other friends—but that as you were seized with sudden illness I thought it best to bring you back to the tavern—adding that you swooned in the hackney-coach. This tale was plausible enough, and of course met with belief."

"But does it not appear strange," I asked, "that medical aid was not sent for immediately on my being brought hither?"

"No—for scarcely were you borne up to this room by the chambermaid and myself, when you gave signs of returning animation; and both the servant and I agreed that it would not be necessary to summon a doctor, as you were evidently recovering. She then withdrew, leaving you in my charge; and by the application of simple restoratives I have brought you back to consciousness. Do you feel better now?"

I answered in the affirmative, and inquired what o'clock it was. Barbauld told me it must be about half-past eleven: but she declared that if I wished, she would cheerfully remain with me the whole night. I assured her there was no necessity for this, as I felt every inclination to sleep: for my mind was now entirely eased as to the temporary delusion which at the time had so much affected it, but I felt much exhausted in body on account of the swoon. The Gipsy Queen accordingly prepared to take her departure, and I observed that she put on a plain but decent shawl, a straw bonnet with a veil, and gloves. As I surveyed her tall form thus apparelled, and as the light shone upon her countenance before she drew down her veil, I could not help thinking what a pity it was that a female of such striking appearance should disfigure herself by the peculiarities of the gipsy garb: for her bonnet set off her handsome countenance a thousand times more effectually than the flaunting silk handkerchief which she habitually wore upon her head. She evidently penetrated my thoughts: for she observed with a smile, "You may perhaps suppose, Mary Price, that being in possession of this garb, I should do well to wear it instead of my usual apparel? But no: it is merely a disguise which I occasionally assume for special purposes; and in my estimation it is most unbecoming. What is called taste, is merely the particular prejudice in which each individual is brought up. But I will not sermonize: for you want to sleep, and a good night's rest will be of material benefit to you. When the maid and I undressed you just now, I took care of the certificate which I gave you. It is here. Place it under your pillow."

I took the document—thanked her—and disposed of it as she suggested.

"And now, ere I bid you good night," she added, "do not be surprised if to-morrow morning you are told that a Mrs. Simpson, or Smith, or a person with some such middle-class name, had sent the first thing to inquire how you are. For not only shall I be really anxious to learn whether you have passed a good night; but the circumstance of sending in that manner will keep up the tale I told the chamber-maid about your having passed the evening with a shopkeeper's wife. And now farewell. It may be long ere we meet again: but if ever you should wish to see me, inquire after me at Nor-

wood. It is not often that I am in London; and I would not like you to call by yourself at that house to which I introduced you this evening."

She gave me her hand, which I pressed warmly, thanking her for her kind ministerings during my temporary indisposition. She then took her departure; and I endeavoured to compose myself to sleep. Soon did I fall into a heavy slumber; but then I was visited by strange bewildering dreams, with that ghastly object I had seen up at St. Giles's, prominent amidst the shadowy forms and phantoms which appeared to hover round my bed. I also beheld my mother's countenance, seeming to gaze upon me with a singular and mournful aspect: and then, with the eccentricity peculiar to the visions of the night, I suddenly fancied that I was present at a wild bacchanalian orgie, the guests consisting of the troop of actors and actresses with whom my brother Robert had associated himself. Again the scene changed, and I found myself in company with Sawbridge and the Bulldog, who were endeavouring to force me to enter that vile den of their's at Ashford where they were wont to manufacture the hideous stuff they sold for the adulteration of coffee. By another transition of these visionary fancies, I was transported to Mr. Messiter's well-remembered front parlour in Snargate Street, Dover; and there methought that I beheld so sad a scene of an agonizing mother and weeping children, that I cried bitterly in my sleep. In the midst of these tears I awoke, and found that my pillow was moistened with them. It was broad daylight; and in a few minutes I heard a clock in the house strike eight.

I now rose, and began to dress myself: but I felt unwell, and also depressed in spirits—doubtless from the effect of the unpleasant dreams which had haunted my slumbers. The tea which I took for breakfast, however, refreshed me; and when the chamber-maid came up to remove the tray, she said, "Mrs. Simpson has sent to inquire how you are this morning; and I told her that you were much better."

Of course I was at no loss to understand who had thus sent: but I saw that the chamber-maid implicitly believed the tale which the Gipsy Queen had told her, and that my respectability had in no wise suffered in the woman's estimation on account of the occurrence of the preceding evening. I now put Barbauld Azetha's certificate in the letter to Lady Harlesdon, which was enclosed in the one for Jemima; and having duly sealed the packet, prepared to take it myself to the post.

For reasons that I am about to explain, my departure to Canterbury was once more postponed: but I hoped not beyond three o'clock in the afternoon. However, I had some fresh business in hand, and lost no time in attending to it. Accordingly, I bent my way to Furnival's Inn, having previously ascertained that it was at no great distance from the *George and Blue Boar*. I did not forget to post my letter as I went along; and on reaching the Inn,—which, for the benefit of those who are unacquainted with London, I may as well observe is not a tavern or hotel, as might be thought from its name, but merely an assemblage of lawyers' chambers,—I asked a beadle, all bedizened with gold lace, in which part of the establishment Mr. Crosby's offices were situated; and he at once answered my inquiry. Crossing an immense court-yard,—for Furnival's Inn is built in the form of a square,—I entered one of the numerous door-ways, and ascending a somewhat dirty staircase, beheld Mr. Crosby's name upon a door on the second landing. On knocking, I was desired by a loud voice to walk in; and found myself in the Clerks' Office. Some five or six of these subordinates were seated at their desks, evidently making preparations for the day's work. One of them, whom I judged to be the head clerk, came forward to inquire my business; and on asking for Mr. Crosby, he said, "Well, the governor is not come yet: but we expect him every minute. Perhaps you will take a seat?"—and he pointed to a chair.

I sat down, and began revolving in my mind how I should open my business to the lawyer, when a little incident took place which I could not help noticing with much mournful attention. A very shabby looking man, who seemed as if his entire apparel would be very dearly purchased at half-a-crown, and whom I had noticed standing outside when I entered the offices, shuffled in with a sort of sneaking, shambling gait, as if he fancied that it was just as likely he should be kicked out again as allowed to remain there at all. Advancing up to the clerk who had spoken to me, and turning his battered hat over and over in his hands, he said, "Please, sir, that little instalment is due to-day:"—and then I heard him heave a profound sigh, amounting almost to a sob.

"Well, I know it is," answered the clerk gruffly: "and I suppose you have come to pay it. Mr. Jones, hand me over the papers in Gray's case."

Another clerk at once tossed a dingy parcel of documents, tied round with red tape, over the desk; and the head clerk was preparing to unfasten the tape, when the shabby-looking individual, after throwing a sort of frightened glance around, said in a subdued tone, "It's no use giving yourself the trouble, sir: I am not come to pay——"

"Not come to pay!" ejaculated the head clerk, who was a stern-looking middle-aged man—and he spoke very loud and very indignantly: "not come to pay! Then what the deuce are you come for?"

"To—to—ask for a little more time——"

"Time be hanged! you have had enough—too much—already."

"But—I—really have not the money. My wife is lying ill; and my eldest daughter, who used to do a little to support us, has—has—run away—and deserted her poor old ruined father:"—and as the wretched man spoke, I saw the tears trickling down his cheeks. But he turned abruptly aside, evidently to conceal his emotion; and taking a tattered pocket-handkerchief out of his hat, he passed it over his countenance.

"Now I tell you what, Mr. Gray," said the head clerk, putting his hands into his pockets and looking very stern, "this nonsense won't do with me. The governor will be here presently; and one of the first questions he will ask will be 'whether Gray has paid the third instalment of costs on that judge's order?' and if I say *no*, he will just tell me to take out judgment and issue execution."

"For God's sake say a kind word for me!" implored the unhappy man.

"Yes—and get the sack for my pains," returned the head clerk sarcastically. "Come, come—that won't do: I know a trick worth two of that. So pay the instalment, or else look out—that's all."

"I can't—I can't—I have not the means," groaned the unhappy man: "you have already taken the bed from under me! My wife is lying ill—perhaps dying—on a heap of old rags; and my God! it is no wonder that my poor girl should have run away from such a wretched, wretched home!"—and again the poor man burst into tears.

"Oh! if you talk to me in that way," exclaimed the head clerk, now tossing up his head with greater indignation than before, "about taking the bed from under you, when it was all done in the legitimate course of business—judgment, *fi. fa.*, and so on—the sooner you bundle off, the better. It's a regular affront to come to a respectable office and charge us people in such a style. So tramp—be off!"

The poor man threw upon the clerk a look so thoroughly woe-begone that it might have melted a heart of stone: and then turning away he slowly dragged himself from the office, shutting the door as noiselessly as if he were afraid of giving farther offence by closing it with the least air of violence. Never shall I forget that despairing look!—it bespoke whole worlds of trouble, and seemed the reflex of all the agonies experienced by a breaking heart. I felt myself weeping, and turned towards the wall to contemplate an almanack in order to hide my emotion from the clerks, who all burst out into a cruel laugh as the door closed behind poor Mr. Gray.

"There never was such a jolly old humbug as he is," observed the head clerk, addressing his brethren or the pen. "I'll be bound he will come back presently with the instalment."

"He's been well off in his time, hasn't he?" inquired a young man with bright red hair, a terribly freckled face, and a flaming blue neckcloth.

"Well off?—to be sure he has!" ejaculated the head clerk. "Why, he rode in his carriage once. He was a tip-top merchant in the City, and was making his eight or ten thousand a year."

"How on earth, then, did he manage to come down in the world like this?" asked the sandy-haired young gentleman.

"By having fifty thousand pounds left him," replied the head clerk.

I started involuntarily at this announcement, which seemed to me perfectly incredible; and I thought that the individual who thus spoke must be jesting: for it appeared out of the natural order of things that a man should be ruined by having a fortune left him.

"Ah! that's how he got into Chancery, eh?" observed the sandy-haired clerk.

"Yes—he was thrown into court quite against his will; and though he said he would sooner give up all claim whatsoever to the fifty thousand pounds, it was impossible to do otherwise than make him a party in the proceedings, as there were several others whose battle had to be fought out in Equity. And a precious expensive law-suit it has been too,—already lasting fifteen years, swallowing up two hundred thousand pounds, ruining seven or eight people, and not likely to end for the next quarter of a century."

At this moment the door opened again; and another shabbily-dressed person made his appearance. But he was a vulgar repulsive man, with a hideous countenance and very dissipated air. He took off his hat, and advancing up to the head clerk, inquired "whether there was any thing for him this morning?"

"Well—been up all night at the *Goose and Gridiron*—eh, old fellow?" said the head clerk, in a jocular tone of good-humoured banter. "But after all, you are the most punctual process-server I ever knew in my life:"—then taking out of his desk several long slips of paper, he went over them one by one, giving instructions as he thus successively placed them in the process-server's hands. "Here's a writ to serve on the Honourable Captain Lavender: you will find him at *Long's Hotel*, in Bond Street. Just send in to say that a person with a letter from a lady wants to see him very particularly, and he will come out at once. The governor doesn't want to arrest him straight off, because there's an understanding in the matter—a wheel within a wheel. Here's a summons to compute, which you have got to leave at Madame Belleville's, the great milliner in Regent Street. Now mind you force your way in, no matter who's there, and deliver it to her personally. Here's a writ for seven pound nine and ninepence, which you have got to go and serve on one James Jenkins: he's only a poor working man, it seems; and this is for a bill his wife has run up unknown to him. I am told he's a steady industrious fellow and will pretty soon come down and make arrangements. Here——"

The door again opened, and in a moment all the subordinate clerks, who had hitherto been yawning, and idling, and chattering, began to drive their pens with furious violence over the paper that lay before them,—this abrupt fit of industry being produced with a sort of galvanic effect by the entrance of a short sharp-looking man, dressed in black, and carrying a parcel of papers under his arm.

"This young person is waiting to see you, sir," said the head clerk, advancing to Mr. Crosby—for he it was.

"Walk in, walk in," he said in a quick bustling tone, as if all the world's business were upon his shoulders, and he with scarcely time to do a tithe of it.

I followed him into his private office; and as he seated himself at a desk, he pointed with a ruler to a chair: then while he began to open his letters, he said, "You can state your business. I am listening to you."

"I believe," said I, "that references are to be made to you, sir, in respect to certain jewels——"

"Ah!" he ejaculated, now raising his head from his correspondence, and fixing his eyes with evident interest upon me: "is it upon that subject you are come?"

"It is, sir," was my answer. "I have seen a handbill offering a reward of three hundred guineas to whomsoever——"

"All right—all right!" he interrupted quickly: "the reward has been offered, and is forthcoming when positive information is received as to the whereabouts of the jewels."

"Then I can give you that information," was my rejoinder. "But before I do so, I must request you to listen to me patiently for a few minutes——"

"Well, a few minutes, then," said Mr. Crosby. "And now proceed."

"Are you at all acquainted, sir, with any particulars concerning those jewels, or for what purpose they were bought?"

"I know nothing of all that; and pardon me for

saying I do not want to know. It is sufficient for me if you can give the information requisite. I am Sir Aubrey Clavering's solicitor, but not his confidant in private matters."

"I will not detain you, sir, many minutes: but I cannot and will not come to the point at once before I have given you a few words of explanation relative to my motives in taking any part towards leading you to the recovery of the jewels."

Mr. Crosby gave a deep sigh and made an ugly face, as he threw himself back in his chair with the look of one who was resigning himself to an awful penance: so I lost no time in resuming my discourse.

"The jewels, sir, of which we are speaking, were purchased by Sir Aubrey Clavering as a present to me: but I scorned the gift as I shrank from the overtures which they were intended to render all the more dazzling. They were stolen—no matter how. Yesterday I arrived in London; and last evening an accident revealed to me where they are. It was also last evening that I read for the first time the handbill offering the reward. Now, sir, it is not for myself that I am seeking this reward: I would sooner perish of starvation in the street than touch a piece of gold coming from Sir Aubrey Clavering's pocket. There is however a family who at the present moment is, I have too much reason to fear, in great distress: in that family, or at least in some portion of it, I am deeply interested; and it is for them that I desire the reward of three hundred guineas to be sent. Will you undertake to do this? and will you also let Sir Aubrey Clavering know, if you enter into any particulars at all with him on the subject, in what way the reward was disposed of?"

"Have you done, Miss?" asked Mr. Crosby.

"I have, sir."

"Then I cheerfully agree to what you have proposed," he immediately rejoined, evidently much relieved on finding that I had no more to say. "Write down upon this piece of paper the name and address of the person to whom the money is to be sent; and rely upon my punctuality. But now for the information which you have to give?" he said when I had written a few lines in compliance with his request.

I mentioned the jeweller's shop near St. Giles's church; and Mr. Crosby was immediately seized with astonishment, exclaiming, "I know him well: he is a highly respectable tradesman! There must be really some mistake!"—then suddenly starting from his chair, he rang the bell.

The head clerk answered the summons; and Mr. Crosby, bidding him shut the door, communicated to him with a very mysterious air the particulars I had just mentioned: but I noticed that the head clerk did *not* look at all surprised when the goldsmith's shop was mentioned.

"To tell you the truth, sir," he said, "there's long been a whispering about him in certain quarters: and though he does hold his head very high, I have often thought that he is no better than he should be."

"Well, at all events," said Mr. Crosby, "we will not make an exposure about it. Take a cab—go up there as quick as you can—and just try and settle the matter quietly at once."

"And if not, sir?"

"Then you must go straight to Bow Street—that's all," returned Mr. Crosby. "Perhaps you will wait here till my clerk comes back?"

These last words were addressed to me; and I readily consented to stay—for I was of course anxious to learn the result of the business. The head clerk disappeared; and Mr. Crosby plunged once more deep into his correspondence, appearing to forget my presence altogether. Not much more than three-quarters of an hour passed, when the head clerk returned with a parcel in his hand; and not only by that indication, but likewise by the smile of satisfaction which was upon his countenance, did I at once feel assured that his mission had been successful. And so it turned out. The jeweller had at once given up all the property, declaring that though he had purchased it in a legitimate manner he would sooner put up with the loss than have any litigation.

"Litigation?" exclaimed Mr. Crosby: "why it would have been an Old Bailey affair. Litigation indeed!—transportation he meant!"

The parcel was opened; and I at once identified the jewels. Mr. Crosby, referring to a written description which he had from Sir Aubrey Clavering found them to be correct; and evidently much satisfied with the result, he assured me that the money should be duly forwarded by the evening's post in pursuance of my instructions.

I then took my departure, profoundly rejoiced to think that I should thus be the means of sending at least one ray of happiness into the bosom of a family which I had pictured to myself as plunged into the deepest distress. Moreover, I reflected upon the strangeness of the manner in which I found myself enabled to confer a benefit upon that family: the very jewels which were originally purchased to serve as a temptation to lure me into the path of wickedness, had become the source of beneficence in another quarter. Such are the inscrutable ways of heaven!

As I was issuing from Furnival's Inn, I beheld poor Mr. Gray, the victim of the Chancery suit, hanging about the gate in a most melancholy manner. The sorrowful picture he had drawn of his misfortunes, hit off as it were with a few rapid but terribly truth-telling dashes, suddenly sprang up vividly again into my mind; and turning aside for an instant, I took out ten shillings from my purse: then hurriedly accosting him, I said; "Forgive the liberty I take!" and thrusting the money into his hand, sped away as rapidly as if I had just been doing an evil action and feared pursuit. Thanks to Captain Calder's generosity, I was thus enabled to bestow a trifle upon one whom I felt convinced to be a deserving object.

CHAPTER XLIX.

MY RETURN INTO KENT.

THERE was nothing now to detain me in London; and accordingly, at three o'clock in the afternoon I took my place in the *Tally-Ho* coach for Canterbury. It was past nine in the evening when we reached the *Rose Hotel* in the latter city; and as there were no means of getting across to Ashford that night, I inquired for a bed. But it was market-day in Canterbury, and the *Rose Hotel* was crowded throughout every chamber: I accordingly went round to the *Fountain*, where, as the reader will re-

collect, Mr. and Mrs. Twisden had put up on the day of our visit to the Cathedral city—that day which first made me acquainted with Sir Aubrey Clavering. At the *Fountain* I obtained a bed; and being much fatigued, speedily sought it and soon sank into a profound repose. That night no unpleasant dreams haunted me; nor did I again see the vision of the ghastly object of St. Giles's.

I awoke early, and rose for the purpose of departing by the eight o'clock coach to Ashford: but the hotel-porter, who went round to the office to secure a place for me, came back with the disagreeable intelligence that every seat of the vehicle was already taken, outside as well as in. There was no alternative but to wait for the afternoon conveyance, in which I at once sent and engaged a place. After breakfast I went out to walk in the city, and visited the fine old cathedral, where I passed a couple of hours, inspecting the monuments and admiring the various architectural beauties and sublimities of the imposing structure. It was about mid-day when I returned to the *Fountain Hotel;* and the first object that struck me was the well-known carriage belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Twisden! I hastened up the court-yard to inquire of a hostler whom I saw at the farther end, whether Mr. and Mrs. Twisden were at the hotel at that moment: because it struck me as probable that they might have disposed of their carriage, and that it was therefore in other hands. But as I passed by a parlour-window looking into the courtyard, and to which there was no blind, conceive my astonishment on beholding Mr. and Mrs. Twisden themselves, seated with Sir Aubrey Clavering at lunch inside that room!

I was rivetted to the spot, and stood gazing in upon the scene. It actually appeared to me that it was still that same day on which we had visited Canterbury when I was in service at the Lodge, and that everything which had since transpired was but a mere troubled dream through whose eventful

mazes I had been whirled. Yes—there was the good old gentleman, looking as mild and benevolent as ever, but preparing to make a vigorous onslaught upon a meat-pie which stood before him. There too was Mrs. Twisden, looking a little older and a little stouter, but still with that quick restless kind of manner which is invariably characteristic of the vixenish disposition. And there, too, was Sir Aubrey Clavering, in his undress military uniform, seated opposite to Mrs. Twisden, and apparently listening with much urbane attention to what she was saying.

Yes—I was indeed rivetted to the spot; and as I thus stood gazing into the room, Mr. Twisden all of a sudden raised his eyes and encountered mine. The recognition was instantaneous; and he must have ejaculated my name as I beheld him spring up from his seat, for both Mrs. Twisden and Sir Aubrey Clavering turned their eyes rapidly towards me. I did not choose to hurry away; for I had no reason to be ashamed of meeting Sir Aubrey Clavering, and I hoped none to fear him: while on the other hand I was most anxious to pay my respects to that good kind old gentleman who had so often taken my part with paternal interest against his wife.

Mr. Twisden darted to the window, and beckoned me to enter. I could not see what was the aspect that Mrs. Twisden wore at this proceeding on his part; but I at once obeyed the invitation, and passed into the room where they were assembled.

"Well, Mary," exclaimed Mr. Twisden, shaking me by the hand most warmly: "I am quite glad to see you again——"

"Really, Mr. Twisden," cried his better half, with that acerbity of tone and manner which I remembered so well, "one would think it was your own daughter you were welcoming. I am sure if it was me returning after a long absence, you would not be so overjoyed."

"But my dear," said the old gentleman, with his wonted bland submissiveness, "you should make allowances. Mary was a very good girl when she was with us——"

"Oh! I don't say that she wasn't," interrupted Mrs. Twisden; "except that she used to let the baby cry enough to make it break its little heart, and Gustavus run on the grass in the winter, and Miranda trample over the borders during all seasons."

"Well, well, if she never did anything worse," remarked Mr. Twisden, "there's no particular harm done."

"Worse, Mr. Twisden!" exclaimed the lady, evidently working herself up to one of her pleasant moods: "how could she possibly do anything worse? And now I think of it, I am sure poor baby has never been well since he used to cry so—and Gustavus has always had a nasty little hacking cough since he used to run on the wet grass—and Miranda has got a perfect mania for trampling down flowers."

"Won't you let Mary sit down, my dear, for a few minutes, and tell us how she has been getting on?" asked Mr. Twisden, turning towards his wife and speaking in a tone of submissive appeal.

"Oh! to be sure! Sit down, Mary—sit down," exclaimed Mrs. Twisden, evidently curbing her ill-humour only because she was afraid of appearing ridiculous or contemptible in the eyes of Sir Aubrey.

"Thank you, ma'am," said I, in a tone which was as much as to say that I would rather not intrude any longer upon her notice, as I saw that she was not over well pleased to meet me. "But if the children are here, I should be happy to see them——"

"No—they are at the Lodge," replied Mrs. Twisden: then after a moment's pause she added in a milder tone, "And if you like to come across to the Lodge some Sunday and see them——"

"Aye, they will be rejoiced to have a romp with you," exclaimed Mr. Twisden, his countenance beaming with good-humour.

"Pray go back to your seat, Mr. Twisden, and hold your tongue," said his wife. "How can you possibly talk of romping on a Sunday? I am ashamed of you."

"I don't see, my dear, that a little innocent sportiveness with children on a Sunday is any harm," observed Mr. Twisden meekly, as he went back to his chair.

"Pray spare your comments, Mr. Twisden: it is no matter what *you* think:"—then turning to me, the lady, who evidently wished to conciliate me in one sense, said, "Will you take a glass of wine, Mary?"

"No, thank you, ma'am," I answered, moving towards the door.

"Just stop one minute," exclaimed Mrs. Twisden. "I don't want you to run away in such a hurry, since I have not seen you for so long a time——"

"With your permission, ma'am, I will call shortly at Twisden Lodge to see the children:"—and then with a respectful curtsey I withdrew.

I was crossing the courtyard to reach that part of the hotel where the chamber in which I had slept was situated, when I heard hasty steps behind me; and the voice of Sir Aubrey Clavering immediately said, "I bring you a message from Mrs. Twisden."

I stopped—but bent my eyes downward, not choosing to look that man in the face, but thus give him to understand that his presence was hateful to me, and that I only paused to listen to him at all through the respect I entertained for my late master and mistress.

"You see, Mary," Sir Aubrey Clavering went on to say, "that I have said nothing to the Twisdens of all that occurred in the country, down in Derbyshire; and as they have only just returned from abroad, they know little or nothing about it. Perhaps you will be equally silent when you see them again?—as I don't want everybody in this part of Kent to be gossipping about me and my concerns."

"I am at least glad, sir," was my answer, delivered coldly but firmly, "to perceive in the first place that you have not dared to calumniate me here, in your native county; and in the second place that you are evidently ashamed of your past conduct towards me. But now, if you please, the message which you have to deliver to me?"

"Mrs. Twisden sent me after you to say that if you like to come over to the Lodge next Sunday, you are welcome:"—and having thus spoken in a haughty tone, the Baronet turned away, and I proceeded up to my own chamber.

I may now take the opportunity of observing that during the few minutes I had remained in the parlour where the luncheon was taking place, Sir Aubrey Clavering had never uttered a word:

had leant back in his chair, sipping a glass of wine with the apparently listless manner and negligent ease of one who has nothing to do with what is going on before him. I was now well pleased to think that this bad and unprincipled man sought to hide as much as possible his infamous proceedings towards me, inasmuch as it seemed to afford a guarantee against the farther propagation of the calumnies to which his conduct had given rise in Derbyshire. But there were other reflections which the interview with my late master and mistress conjured up in my mind. Indeed, it was with pain I had beheld that Mr. Twisden was, if possible, more completely subject to the tyranny of his wife than ever; while, on the other hand, she was evidently less scrupulous than she was wont to be of domineering over him in the presence of a guest. I sincerely pitied the poor old gentleman, and could not help thinking that Mrs. Twisden must naturally possess a heartless disposition thus to behave towards so good and benevolent a man. That she had conducted herself, towards the latter part of our interview, in a more condescending manner towards me than when I first entered the room, was to be attributed most probably to a second thought that had struck her, suggesting the policy of such a proceeding so as to prevent me from gossipping in respect to that memorable adventure with Mr. Trips the actor, which had revealed the lady's former condition of life. Ah! how little did she know me to think that I should ever take delight in propagating unpleasant reports concerning my fellow-creatures.

Shortly after two o'clock I took my seat in the van, and was now fairly on my way to Ashford; and in a couple of hours I entered that town. Leaving my boxes at the coach-office, I at once hastened to see William, and found him in the surgery at Mr. Collins's house. He was now a little past sixteen, and had grown amazingly since I last saw him, which was upwards of a year and a half. Always tall and good-looking, he had nevertheless improved to an extent which quite delighted me; and I felt proud in the possession of such a brother, because I knew that he was as good as he was handsome. He was overjoyed to see me; but when the first effusion of gladness attendant upon our meeting was passed, his looks suddenly became profoundly mournful as he told me that Mrs. Whitfield had been seized with a very sudden and alarming illness the day before—an attack of paralysis indeed—and was not expected to live. Mr. Collins had been up with her the whole of the preceding night, and had passed the greater portion of the day of which I am writing at her bedside. Of course this was evil intelligence for me, as by her death my two sisters would lose a home and a worthy though very eccentric friend.

I resolved to repair at once to Mrs. Whitfield's house. William could not accompany me: he was forced to remain in the surgery to help the assistant in making up the medicines. Mr. Collins's housekeeper, as I was going out, welcomed me with kindness back to Ashford, and told me that if I liked to share her chamber for a few days I was perfectly welcome. This proposal I accepted with gratitude; and she undertook to send some one up to the coach-office to fetch down my boxes for me.

I now proceeded to Mrs. Whitfield's, and in a few minutes had the pleasure of embracing my two sisters. Sarah was naturally cold, and was far from being enthusiastic in the welcome which she gave me: but Jane hugged me again and again and seemed never tired of embracing me. Sarah, who was nearly fifteen, was as tall as myself, and had grown remarkably handsome. Her raven black hair floated in thick heavy masses over her shoulders; and her eyes, dark as night, were full of a soft lustre, so that while exceedingly bright, they nevertheless had a kind of languishing look. She seemed at least a couple of years older than she really was,—her figure being full and already expanding into the rich contours of womanhood. I have already stated in an earlier chapter that she possessed, in its most perfect beauty, that Grecian profile which was characteristic of our family; and altogether she was certainly one of the most beautiful creatures I ever saw—far, far too beautiful for her situation in life!

Jane, who was now twelve and a half, had likewise grown much; but she was still a fat chubby-looking bouncing girl; and a single glance at her blue eyes, rosy cheeks, cherry lips, and dimpled chin, was sufficient to show that she was as artless, innocent, and sweet-tempered a creature as it was possible to be. They were both very handsomely dressed, and looked quite like ladies. Indeed there was something especially superior about Sarah; and if introduced to a stranger as the daughter of a duchess, there was nothing in her appearance, her manners, or her bearing, to give the contradiction to such an announcement.

I sat down with my sisters; and they told me that Mrs. Whitfield was indeed very ill, paralysed and speechless, and not expected to live. Sarah shed not a single tear as she thus spoke: whereas Jane began to cry bitterly.

"Don't be such a silly girl," exclaimed Sarah, somewhat sharply. "I dare say if Mrs. Whitfield should die just now, she will leave us all her property."

"Oh! but shall we not lose a very kind and dear friend?" asked Jane, her voice almost choked with convulsive sobs.

"Sarah," I observed, looking very seriously upon my sister, "you should not have spoken in that manner—nor should you even allow yourself to *think* in a way that would suggest such words."

"Just as if one could help one's thoughts!" ejaculated Sarah, with a sort of disdainful toss of the head. "You must not think of lecturing me, Mary, although you are my eldest sister: because I have been educated at a young lady's day-school, and have learnt a great many things that you know nothing about. Therefore, though you are four years older than I am, you have no right to assume the superior. It isn't so much age—it's knowledge and experience that regulate these kind of things."

I was both astonished and hurt at being addressed in this manner; and little Jane, evidently understanding what I felt, threw her arms round my neck and kissed me affectionately,—saying, "Don't mind what Sarah says: she often talks to me in the same kind of way, but she doesn't mean any harm."

The tears had risen to my eyes; but hastily brushing them away—for I did not choose to let Sarah perceive how much I felt her observations,—I said to her in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "It is not school knowledge, my dear sister, which gives

true experience: and if you knew all through which I have passed, you would indeed admit that few persons of even double my age can possibly have half my experience."

"Oh! we read in the newspaper all about the affair at Derby," answered Sarah; "and I must say that I envied you, Mary, to be so much talked about, and even spoken to by a great Judge."

"Ah! but I cried very much when I thought of all you had gone through, dear Mary," exclaimed Jane, now kissing my hand, which she pressed between both her own little fat ones.

At this moment the door opened slowly, and Mr. Collins entered with a very grave countenance—so that I immediately apprehended the worst in respect to Mrs. Whitfield. He took my hand, and said in a low and subdued tone, "Mary, I am glad to see you. In one sense you have come back to Ashford at an unhappy time: but in another it is fortunate that you are here at this moment—for you are now the guardian of your two sisters!"

"Then she has gone, sir?" I said, immediately understanding that my melancholy presentiment was confirmed.

"She is no more," replied Mr. Collins.

Little Jane burst forth into a perfect agony of weeping; and Sarah put her handkerchief to her eyes —heaven forgive me for suspecting that she did not weep very much, if at all! I myself was much affected—through no selfish considerations on my two sisters' account, but purely and simply for the loss of one who, though I had known so little of her, was nevertheless entitled to my gratitude and respect for having afforded those much-loved sisters a home.

By the advice of the worthy surgeon, Sarah and Jane continued beneath the same roof until the funeral was over; and during this interval of a week I slept at Mr. Collins's abode with his housekeeper. Passing however the best part of each day in company with my two sisters, I had thus frequent opportunities of studying the dispositions of Sarah and Jane; and the more I was compelled to contrast them, the greater was the pain that this comparison gave me. I could not conceal from myself that Sarah was selfish, vain, conceited, and overbearing, —impatient of contradiction, conscious of her great personal beauty, and thoroughly convinced that she was destined to become the heroine of some magnificent romance the issue of which would, like that of novels, raise her to an elevated rank. On the other hand, Jane was of the most artless affability,—docile and tractable,—ever ready to please, prompt to follow the advice given her, and proving herself to be of the most affectionate disposition. It was quite clear that Sarah was not the least grieved by Mrs. Whitfield's death, but all along looked forward with impatience for the funeral to be over in order that the will (if there were one, as she did not doubt) might be read: while Jane frequently gave way to her sorrow, and sometimes sobbed as if her heart would break. At length, when the obsequies had terminated and the remains of Mrs. Whitfield were consigned to a vault in Ashford Church, Mr. Collins, accompanied by a solicitor who lived in the town, proceeded to inspect the deceased lady's writing-desk: but no will was to be found there. Her drawers, her cupboards, and her boxes were then searched; and nothing was to be found in the shape of the wished-for document. The solicitor, who had known Mrs. Whitfield for many years, declared it was his impression that she had not made a will at all, inasmuch as she had never consulted him upon any such topic. It farther appeared that when in her last moments she had recovered her consciousness and Mr. Collins had desired her to state whether she had any parting request to make, she had endeavoured to give utterance to some words, but her powers failing her, she had sunk back and expired.

Not to dwell longer than is necessary on this part of my narrative, I may at once observe that no will was to be found. Every place, nook, and corner that could be thought of as the possible hiding-place for such a document, had been duly searched; and the most active in this investigation was my sister Sarah. But all of no avail!—not a scrap of paper could be discovered at all indicative of the manner in which Mrs. Whitfield had purposed to dispose of her property. Neither was there much ready money found on the premises: and thus all the reports which were in circulation for years respecting her miserly habits and hoarding propensities, seemed to be altogether unfounded. At the same time, as it appeared that she had enjoyed an income of four hundred a-year, the difficulty was to conceive how she could possibly have spent so much money, living in retirement as she did, at such a cheap place as Ashford, and having no rent to pay, the house being her own. However, certain it was that neither testamentary document nor golden hoard could be discovered, notwithstanding the most vigilant search throughout the premises from cellar to attic. As I have before observed, in a former chapter, she did not appear to have ever been visited by any relations; and if she possessed any, no clue was to be discovered to their names or their abodes. The only positive point that could be ascertained was that her income had been derived from a sum of ten thousand pounds in the funds; and if no heir-at-law should come forward to assert and prove his title, the whole of that money would be merged in the general mass of unclaimed stock in the coffers of the Bank of England. Advertisements were inserted in the newspapers, announcing Mrs. Whitfield's death, and calling upon her nearest relative, if there were one, to come forward: but these announcements remained without effect.

All the hopes which had been conceived relative to my two sisters inheriting the property of Mrs. Whitfield, were now dashed to the ground; and the two girls were left as poor and as portionless as I was myself. This was a sad blow to Sarah; and she who had not cried through grief at Mrs. Whitfield's death, now cried bitterly through vexation. Under the peculiar circumstances of the case, it was not competent for anybody to dispose of a single article within those walls which death had so lately entered. The house being the deceased lady's own property, all that could be done was to barricade the shutters, close the doors, and leave the furniture to rot and decay if no heir should ever step forward to claim it. Mr. Collins asked the solicitor whether it might not be permitted at least to dispose of that furniture for the benefit of my two sisters: but a peremptory negative was returned,—the lawyer declaring that in case an heir should sooner or later turn up, he might prosecute for robbery all who were engaged

in such a proceeding. In a word, all that it was considered prudent to do was to allow Sarah and Jane to take possession of their boxes of clothes, and to divide between them the few guineas which remained in the shape of ready money in the house after all the funeral expenses had been defrayed. The premises were accordingly shut up, as I have above stated; and I took a lodging in the town, to which my two sisters were removed, and where I now dwelt with them.

CHAPTER L.

THE MESSITERS AGAIN.

In describing the particulars of Mrs. Whitfield's death, and its immediate results so far as my two sisters were concerned, I have purposely abstained from interrupting the narrative to touch upon matters of an extraneous character. But I must now pause for a few minutes to mention two or three little circumstances. In the first place, when conversing alone with my brother William, I told him all that had occurred at Derby in respect to Robert; and though in one sense there was reason for congratulation on account of his withdrawal from the companionship of the infamous Bulldog and Sawbridge, yet on the other hand William shared in my regrets that Robert should have connected himself with Mr. Tomlinson and his troop. Relative to my recent adventures in London, I did not think it prudent to touch upon the incident in St. Giles's, nor in any way unsettle William's mind in respect to our father's fate: for though I still felt convinced that I had been deceived by the mere fact of an extraordinary resemblance, yet still that occurrence was calculated to throw a mysterious shade of uncertainty over my father's death. In respect to what I had done for the Messiters, I had no reason to keep this circumstance concealed from William; and he was well pleased to hear that Providence had empowered me to render so signal a service in that quarter. As a matter of course, William and I deliberated with great seriousness, after Mrs. Whitfield's funeral, how we should proceed in respect to Sarah and Jane; and in these discussions we were assisted by the advice of our kind friend Mr. Collins.

The reader is already aware that my two sisters had received the benefit of an excellent education during the time they were with Mrs. Whitfield,—an education indeed which, in respect to its accomplishments, was far above their position in life. Jane was still too young, being not yet thirteen, to launch forth into the wide world; and at first William and I were sadly perplexed to know what we should do with her. But it was now that the friendship of Mr. Collins was most generously displayed; and he addressed us in the following manner:—

"You know, my young friends, that through misfortunes experienced within the last year or two, I am by no means rich; and at an age when I ought to be enabled to enjoy a competency, I have yet to maintain a struggle with the world. I am therefore unable to do for you all that my feelings suggest: but I will assist you to the extent of my power. Little Jane, therefore, shall come and reside beneath my roof for the present. The housekeeper will take care of her, and she will be happy in the companionship of her brother. I will thus give her a home until she reaches an age when she may think of earning her own bread. As for Sarah, if we could procure for her the situation of nursery-governess, or even under-governess, in a wealthy family where such a person is required, it will be the best thing we can do."

William and myself not only gave our full acquiescence to this suggestion in respect to Sarah, but likewise expressed our fervent gratitude for Mr. Collins' goodness with regard to Jane: and it was decided that they should both continue to live with me in our present lodging until we could procure such a situation for Sarah as we thought would suit her. Our plans being thus laid down, advertisements setting forth the situation that was wanted and the qualities of the applicant, were duly inserted in all the Kentish newspapers.

I had written a brief but respectful letter to Mrs. Twisden, explaining to her the reasons which prevented me from calling at the Lodge on the Sunday for which I was invited by the message sent through Sir Aubrey Clavering; and without making any definite promise, I stated that as soon as circumstances would permit, I should pay my respects to her. From Mrs. Messiter I had received a letter, directed to me at the Post Office, Ashford, and in which the poor woman poured forth all her gratitude for the great kindness I had done her. Mr. Crosby had duly forwarded to her the three hundred guineas, by the aid of which it was hoped her husband would be enabled to make a compromise with his creditors, so as to supersede his bankruptcy and save his furniture and stock from being sold by auction: but still the poor woman wrote in the utmost affliction, for her eldest boy was lying upon the bed of death, his life dissolving perceptibly away before her eyes beneath the insidious hand of consumption. She said little of her husband,—merely observing that his misfortunes, having preyed upon his mind, had driven him to seek consolation in a greater indulgence in the bottle than he had ever before yielded to; in short, that his habits were now far from being so temperate as formerly. In conclusion, she begged and implored that I would pay them a visit for a day or two, as her dear boy was constantly expressing a wish "to see Mary Price before he died."

I wept over this letter;—indeed I wept plentifully, as I thought of that amiable and pensive-looking child who thus knew that he was dying, and in the natural goodness of his disposition longed to see me because I had been kind to him when in his parents' service. I accordingly resolved to lose no time in fulfilling the wish of the departing boy; and arrangements being made for my brother William to sleep at the lodgings during my temporary absence, I one morning set off for Dover. This was three weeks after Mrs. Whitfield's death, and when all the above-mentioned plans had been duly settled and arranged in respect to Sarah and Jane.

It was about five o'clock in the evening when I arrived at Dover, having, as the reader will recollect, to go round by Canterbury; and on alighting from the coach at Mr. Messiter's abode, I found the shop all shut up and the house looking as if death were already there. An icy chill struck to my very heart: but raising my eyes, I observed that the blinds were not drawn down in the upper windows, and was

therefore at once relieved by the thought that the shop was merely closed through the bankruptcy and not because the destroying angel had already borne away the spirit of him whom I had specially come to see. While waiting till the front door was opened, I cast a glance opposite, and perceived that the rival establishment of Mr. Smithson presented even a far more imposing appearance than when it was first opened. The window was literally crammed with goods; and the large panes of plate glass were covered with bills announcing the "reduced prices" at which everything was sold, and puffing off the various articles in the most extravagant manner. Without knowing much of business, but forming my opinion from the havoc which competition had wrought in the establishment of the astute, money-making, and unscrupulous Mr. Messiter, I could not help thinking that Mr. Smithson's prosperity might after all exist rather in outward show than in intrinsic reality.

The front door was opened by a dirty drab of a servant girl, to whom even Betsy was a miracle of respectability and cleanliness; and my first question was relative to the dying boy.

"Well, he ain't no better, and I think he's wuss," was the answer, given with the most perfect indifference. "The doctor is with him now, and missus has been crying all day. But be you Miss Price that's expected?" she asked, observing that I had a small box with me, which the coachman had put down when I alighted at the door.

I gave an affirmative answer; and hurrying past her, ascended the stairs to the front parlour,—that well-known parlour, which was now in worse order than ever. The furniture seemed to have been utterly neglected for some time; and there was a gloom about the place as well as a silence in the house that again struck with a chill to my heart. Mrs. Messiter was never what can be called a tidy woman; and latterly domestic afflictions had no doubt prevented her from devoting even the little amount of care and attention which she was at any time wont to bestow upon the interior economy of the household. A dead silence seemed to prevail throughout the dwelling; and not so much as the voice of any of the children reached my ears. The summer-day had been sultry to a degree—the evening was warm with a heavy sickly atmosphere, no freshening breeze coming from the sea—and yet I shuddered from head to foot with a sensation of intense cold. The gloom and the silence were awful, making one feel as if death were already in the house!

"Ah, my dear girl! you have come at last," said a voice, suddenly breaking that ominous silence; and turning round, I beheld Mrs. Messiter.

But how altered she was! The reader will remember that I first described her as a delicate-looking, pale-faced woman, with a melancholy expression of countenance,—not over-neatly dressed, and indeed somewhat slovenly: but now she was thin even to emaciation—her cheeks were sunken—her eyes hollow, and the edges red with weeping—while her apparel denoted an utter neglect of her personal appearance. She embraced me, and then sank down in a chair, sobbing bitterly and crying, "Oh, my poor boy! my poor boy! can nothing save him?"

These words at least assured me that he was still alive; and I said what I could to console the poor woman. But alas! it is so difficult to find anything consolatory under such circumstances.

"Mary," she said, endeavouring to subdue her grief, "I am very, very glad you have come. Your name is constantly upon the poor child's lips. You know that he possesses an intelligence far beyond his years; and he can therefore appreciate the noble generosity of your conduct in causing that very large sum of money to be forwarded to us. But I could scarcely bring myself to accept such unheard-of bounty at your hands: for that sum would have made you rich."

"My dear madam," I answered, "you give me credit for far more generosity than I really deserve. It was a sum of money which no earthly consideration would have induced me to appropriate to my own uses; and therefore it was merely asking you to accept something which was not available for me. May I hope that it will have the effect of relieving Mr. Messiter from embarrassment?"

"It will, my dear girl," was the reply. "His creditors have already agreed to his terms, and the shop would be opened again to-morrow, were it not——"

She stopped short, and again burst forth into an agony of weeping. My own tears fell thick and fast: for I understood too well what she meant. Her poor boy's hour was drawing near; and the shutters which Bankruptcy put up, would still be kept closed for awhile by the hand of Death!

"May I see him now?" I asked, taking off my bonnet and shawl.

She gave no verbal answer—grief was suffocating her: but rising from her chair, she led the way slowly and noiselessly up to the bed-chamber, where her dying son lay. The doctor had just left, and the poor boy appeared to be sleeping when his mother thus conducted me into the room. We advanced gently up to the bed, and I gazed upon him through the dimness of my tears. His eyes were closed, and his countenance was already pale as death, save where upon the cheeks the hectic flush of consumption—that silent cheater of the eye—still lingered. His lips were apart, and his breathing was so very low as to be scarcely audible: still he *did* breathe, for the spark of life was not extinguished altogether. He was very thin: but there was an ineffable expression of sweetness upon his features, as if resignation—death's precursor—shed its soft but solemn influence upon his soul. Thus, in his twelfth year, was that amiable child passing away from a world which is indeed one of care and trouble, and already hovering upon the threshold of that sphere which though unknown to us upon earth, is yet fraught with hope and promise for the sinless and the pure.

He opened his eyes slowly; and as his looks first encountered his mother's face, he extended his thin wan hand with the long waxen fingers, and said in a soft clear voice, "Do not weep for me, dear mother: I shall be happy now!"—then catching sight of me, he exclaimed, with a temporarily renovated power of utterance, "O Mary, dear Mary! you are come to see me at last!"

"Yes, my dear boy," I answered; "and I should have been to see you before, had not imperative circumstances detained me elsewhere."

He threw his arms around my neck, drew me

towards him, and kissed me affectionately. I wept with an unspeakable woe: for it was a sad, sad thing to see that poor child dying thus, while yet but so tender a flower and endowed with so many amiable and excellent qualities to make him beloved. Besides,—alas! that my experiences should compel me to say it—the immense garden of humanity, rich as it may be in the gaudiest flowers of aristocracy, and overrun as it also is with the fearfully prolific weeds of demoralization and vice, has so few delicate, modest, and interesting plants that it cannot afford to lose them ere their time!

"Mary," said the dying boy, as I took a chair and sat down at his request by the side of the couch, "I have never forgotten you since you were here. The many good things you used to tell me, have dwelt in my thoughts, and have proved a great consolation to me ever since I knew that I was going to die. For hours have I lain here thinking of everything you ever said, and also of the prayers that you taught my little brothers and sisters,—until I have fancied that you must be an angel in human shape sent upon this earth to do good. In my sleep, too, I have dreamt of you, Mary; and then you have assumed the form of an angel, standing by my bedside and teaching me how to die. All that you have done for my father and poor mother is known to me; and I have cried in joy and thankfulness to think that when God chose to be good to them, He should have selected you as the giver of his bounties. Ah! Mary, I should not have been so resigned and even happy now, if I had known that I was to leave my parents and my brothers and sisters in distress and misery. No—I should have been very, very unhappy, and should have clung to life, feeling that it would have been dreadful to depart from it with *want* staring them in the face! But through your goodness, all fear on that head has gone; and it is you who have smoothed the pillow of my death-bed."

Mrs. Messiter had turned away while her son was thus speaking; and concealed by the curtain from his view, she had continued to weep with heart-breaking agony, but with suppressed sobs so that he might not hear the outpourings of her poignant affliction. Down my own cheeks the tears rained fast; and I could not utter a word while the amiable boy was speaking in that low, plaintive, but still clear voice, which penetrated like a sacred and mournful melody to the very depths of my soul. The intelligence which marked his words—the unstudied pathos which was breathed in his language—the artless sincerity that characterised all he said, invested the whole scene with a profound yet deeply touching interest that I never can forget.

"Have you seen my brothers and sisters?" he asked, after a short pause.

"No," I replied. "I came to see you first."

"Then, if I have felt so much pleasure in meeting you again," he said, with a sweet but melancholy smile, "I am sure they will be glad also. Do go and see them—those poor little things!—and then come back to me."

I did as he requested, and ascended to an upper room where the other children were together,—Mrs. Messiter remaining by the side of the dying boy. All but the youngest immediately recollected me and their looks, spirit-broken and mournful when I entered, instantaneously cheered up as they flocked around me with joy upon their pale countenances. I sat down amongst them, taking the youngest upon my knees—that one whom as a babe I had carried in my arms, and who with a sort of instinctive fondness, willingly came to me. The two eldest children of the little group (five in all) knew that their brother was dying, and they began to cry as I spoke to them about him; but the youngest three, not comprehending their brother's danger nor what death was, were happily ignorant of the cause that made the others weep. I could not help noticing that the poor children all seemed to be cowed and spirit-broken, afraid of making the slightest noise lest they should be scolded, and with none of the buoyancy of disposition which was proper to their age: but I knew that the influence which thus hung like a dark cloud over the minds of these little ones, emanated from the sternness of the father, and would perhaps have been more crushing still were it not for such stealthy indulgence as their mother dared show them.

Having remained with the children for about half-an-hour, and distributed amongst them some toys and cakes which I had purposely brought with me from Ashford, I descended to the room where I had left Mrs. Messiter by the side of her dying boy. Mr. Messiter was now there; and as I entered, I could not help being struck by his appearance. He who was wont to be so prim and precise in his apparel, was now slovenly, dirty, and negligent; and though he had not lost the severity of his looks, yet instead of a false sanctimoniousness, he had an air of dissipation and debauchery. His countenance was flushed, and his eyes had that red and watery appearance which betray the hard-drinker. In a word, it was impossible to mistake the truth—namely, that Mr. Messiter had taken to the bottle even more completely than his wife's letter had led me to suspect, and that he was becoming, if he were not already, a drunkard. Nay, to tell the *whole* truth, he was not even sober on this occasion, though it was still early in the evening (being barely seven o'clock), and though his eldest son lay upon the bed of death. For a moment I felt so shocked that I remained at the door, not daring to advance farther into a room the sacred atmosphere of which seemed to be polluted by the odour of a breath poisoned by strong drink: but almost instantaneously catching the look of mingled entreaty and distress which Mrs. Messiter flung upon me, I approached her husband, who held out his hand to give me such greeting as it was in his callous selfish nature to bestow.

"Well, Mary, so you have come to see us—eh?" he said, steadying himself as he spoke against the mantel-piece. "Ah! there are great changes here. That scoundrel Smithson has done it all——"

"No, sir—not *all*," I answered, in a low tone, but with a significant look towards the bed,—my object being to recall his thoughts from worldly concerns to the solemn spectacle of his son's approaching death.

"Mary, come to me," said the dying child, in a voice which struck me to be much fainter and with an utterance more painful than ere I had quitted the room half-an-hour back. "There—sit down beside me," he continued, as I approached him: "I like to have you near me. Mother, dear mother, don't cry: it does grieve me so to see you weep thus.

Father, come and kiss me: give me your hand—I want to say something to you."

Mr. Messiter, who seemed to be suddenly sobered by this appeal, as if he felt it to be one of death, approached the couch—bent down—and kissed his dying son. Then the callous heart of that man was evidently moved; and with low accents, he said, "Tell me what it is, my poor boy. Speak out: don't be afraid—I am listening to you."

Was it a passing remorseful consciousness of former tyranny that made him thus bid his son speak out freely? and did he think it necessary to relieve that child, even on his death-bed, from the influence of paternal terrorism in the utterance of his last words?

"My dear father," said the poor boy, speaking with an increasing difficulty, "I have got something that I really wish to say—and yet I scarcely like—for I am so afraid—so very much afraid of angering you—or that you will be displeased."

"It is impossible, my dear boy," I said, "that your father can be displeased with anything you may utter now."

"No, no," said Mr. Messiter: "speak—do not be afraid——My God! do speak, my poor boy!"—and the stern heart of that man being deeply moved, he burst into tears.

"O father! in one sense I am glad to see you weep:"—and an expression of joy, sweet and radiant such as human fancy depicts as appearing upon the countenance of a holy angel, suddenly illuminated the features of the dying boy. "I am sure, my dear father, that you will attend to me now. Ah! dear Mary," he added, turning his eyes towards me, "I told you just now that you were an angel, and you see the good that your presence has done."

I was weeping—and the poor afflicted mother was also weeping, with a vain attempt to subdue the outward appearance of her grief as much as possible.

"My dear father," continued the poor child, pressing his parent's large hand between his own thin wasted waxen ones, "I am going to leave you—and my poor mother too—and my dear little brothers and sisters—and my kind friend Mary also; and in a short time—perhaps within an hour, for I feel that I am sinking—I shall be no longer here! Then, my dear father, when you think of me and remember your poor little son who always did his best to please you and be as dutiful as he could, you will not perhaps forget the last request he made. And think, dear papa, that if when I am in heaven I am allowed to look down upon what is passing on this earth, how happy it will make me to see you have really borne in mind these dying words which I am uttering. Father," he said, taking his mother's hand, and making it join with that of his sire, "if you understand what I mean I will not say it in words. And yet perhaps it is better—although at this moment it causes me a great pang to speak these words——Yet what I mean is this, dear father——do——do be good to my poor mother—and my dear little brothers and sisters."

I know not how Mr. Messiter looked: at that moment my tears were blinding me, and I heard the poor mother sobbing convulsively: but I suppose that Mr. Messiter gave some indication of assent to the prayer of his dying child; for after a brief pause the poor boy exclaimed in a tone of enthusiastic gratitude, "Thank you, my dear papa, I shall now die happy. Mary dear, go and fetch me my brothers and sisters that I may bid them good bye."

I hastened from the room, but with noiseless steps: and as I was issuing forth I met the doctor, who was returning to pay another visit——his last! I stopped for a few moments in the passage to ask him whether there were no hope?—in my own heart I knew that there was none; and yet, futile though the question were, it was one of those which in such cases is so often put. The doctor shook his head and entered the room, while I ascended the stairs to fetch down the children. I scarcely knew how to act—whether to tell the eldest ones anything that might prepare them, or to leave all to nature's own promptings: and I decided upon the latter course. Subduing my own grief as well as I was able, and drying my tears so as not to afflict the poor children ere they entered the death-chamber, I conducted them down thither.

Then, one after the other, did the poor dying boy have his brothers and his sisters placed upon the bed in such a manner that he could embrace them. And, Oh! what kisses did he lavish upon them! All the last efforts of life were poured forth in the fondness of those caresses. The two eldest either understood from their own knowledge, or else were taught by an instinctive prompting what was about to take place; and they began to cry very bitterly. The three youngest cried because the others did; and altogether the scene was full of the deepest but most afflicting interest. The youngest of all, who was still called "the baby," though indeed nearly two years old, had from its birth been the special darling of the dying boy; and he now strained the little being to his breast as if he dared not part from it. It was even while thus retaining the little one there that the ominous sound commenced in his throat which heralded the presence of death; and the doctor was compelled gently to take the child away from its dying brother. I then conducted them out of the room; and consigning them to the care of the servant-girl, returned into the chamber—for I knew it was the wish of the departing boy that I should be near him until the last. The awful solemnity of the scene helped to subdue the outward violence of that grief which I endeavoured to keep down: but it nearly burst forth with sudden ebullition when I beheld that sweet angelic smile of resignation which was playing upon his features as I again approached the couch. Mr. Messiter had his kerchief to his eyes. Mrs. Messiter was kneeling down with her child's right hand pressed to her lips. The doctor stood by with mournful gravity, contemplating the scene in which his services were of no farther avail.

In a few minutes all was over—the spirit of that amiable child, released from its mortal clay, had fled to heaven!

"O God, he is gone!" moaned the unhappy mother, as she still pressed the now lifeless hand to her lips.

When the heart is full almost unto bursting with a woe restrained by a preternatural effort, it requires but the slightest incident—a single word—to touch the chord that is stretched; and then the vibration, though lasting but for a moment, is fraught with such exquisite pain that nature can supply but one

remedy—and this is tears. So was it with me. The words from the bereaved mother's lips touched that chord in my heart; and all my pent-up feelings burst forth. I wept as bitterly as if that dead boy had been one of my own brothers!

But I will not dwell upon this passage in my history. Suffice it to say that at the earnest entreaty of Mrs. Messiter I agreed to remain with her until after the funeral; and I wrote to my brother William to state that such was my intention. Mrs. Messiter experienced an affliction for the loss of her child which seemed scarcely to admit of comfort: but I regret to say that her husband made the calamity an excuse for frequent applications to the bottle. The funeral took place on the sixth day after the death; and then I departed from Dover—but not without having had the satisfaction of seeing that Mr. Messiter's affairs were completely arranged with his creditors, and that he was in a position to renew his business—a circumstance which I hoped would prove to some extent mitigatory of the affliction endured by his wife.

CHAPTER LI.

STRANGE OCCURRENCES.

On my return to Ashford I found that three or four answers had been already received to the advertisements inserted with respect to Sarah; but none of them appeared exactly suitable. It was therefore resolved to repeat the announcements, and not be in too great a hurry to catch at anything that offered itself, but, on the contrary, to exercise the utmost prudence in taking so solemn a step as that of launching my sister out into the world.

The reader may be assured that since my return

to Ashford from Derbyshire I had not forgotten to inquire after poor Mad Tommy: but I learnt from William that he had recently disappeared from the neighbourhood—a circumstance however which caused no uneasiness to those who wished him well, as these periodical freaks of absence and wandering about, were in accordance with his habits. As for Nick Sawbridge and Ben Bulldog, the town of Ashford was still happy in being relieved from their presence.

The house in which I lived with my sisters, was a small one, kept by a poor widow-woman; and the lodgings which we occupied consisted of two rooms on the first floor, not opening into each other, but communicating from the same landing. Jane slept with me in the back chamber; and Sarah had a bed made up for her at night in the front room, and which being cleared away during the day, left this front apartment free for our use as a sitting-parlour. One night, about a week after my return from the Messiters at Dover, I lay awake in one of those moods when a variety of conflicting thoughts persist in obtruding themselves upon the mind and chasing away slumber. We had gone to bed as usual at about ten o'clock; and the iron tongue of the great church-tower had proclaimed eleven some time—yet I could not compose myself to sleep. I thought of that poor boy whom I had seen die so recently,—I thought of the Calders, wondering where they were, and hoping soon to hear from them,—I thought of Lady Harlesdon, calculating that as five weeks had now elapsed since I wrote from London, I ought to have had an answer if her ladyship meant to reply at all,—I thought likewise of the Percivals, to whom I had despatched a letter the day before,—of my brother Robert, from whom I had heard nothing since we parted at Derby,—and I thought also of Eustace Quentin, from whom in a few months now I was to receive a letter on the attainment of his majority. Of all these things I thought—and I could not get to sleep. Little Jane was fast locked in the arms of slumber by my side—the house was entombed in silence—silence also appeared to envelop the sleeping town.

It must have been about half-past eleven o'clock when it struck me that I heard a noise, as of a door opening—the door too of the front room in which Sarah slept. I listened with suspended breath and in some degree of terror; for all kinds of horrible ideas of burglars, robbers, and murderers started up in my mind, amongst which images those of the Bulldog and Sawbridge were instantaneously prominent. But that noise was as transitory as it was dubious—and I heard no more. Soon after I gradually sank off into a slumber—but my dreams were troubled: that sound of the opening door was heard again in my visions, and I passed through all the horrors of a nightmare. At length I awoke with a sudden start, and at the very same instant it struck me that I again heard the door of the adjoining room moving—but this time it seemed as if instead of being opened, it was being shut with caution.

The dawn of morning was glimmering in at the window, and I felt less afraid than when startled in the darkness of the early part of the night. My first impulse was now to leap out of bed and go and see if anything were the matter: but on approaching the door of my chamber and pausing to listen ere I opened it, I found everything was so silent in the house that I went back to bed, ashamed of my fears. Sleep again visited me—and I slumbered on peacefully and without any more unpleasant dreams until it was time to get up. I then thought little more of the circumstances which had alarmed me, and did not mention them to my sisters.

But when night came again and I lay down by the side of Jane, who was already in bed and fast asleep, I regretted having extinguished my candle; for a sensation of uneasiness crept over me when I recollected the incidents of the preceding night. I endeavoured to banish these vague fears from my mind: but the longer I thought upon them, the more substantial did they seem to grow—so that for an hour I lay turning from side to side, unable to sleep. At length a sort of drowsiness, or dreamy repose, rather than the more opiatic influence of slumber, came upon me; and from this state I was suddenly startled by hearing precisely the same sound which had terrified me at about the same hour on the previous night. This was of a door opening very gently—and, as I thought, the door of the front room. Still I was not certain—it might only be fancy on my part, the reproduction of my waking thoughts in the dreaminess of repose. I accordingly laid still and listened. But in less than a minute I heard another sound, as if the front door of the house had been gently closed by some one going out very cautiously. I now felt seriously alarmed, and getting up, opened the chamber-door to listen. All was still. I stepped forth upon the landing, which was quite dark; and I shuddered as I thought of the possibility of being seized upon by some ruffian hand. I would have lighted the candle, but I had not the materials in the room. Summoning all my courage to my aid, I felt for the door of the front room, but found it shut and locked. I listened for a minute to see whether the noise of trying the handle had disturbed Sarah within: but as she did not speak, I went back to my own chamber, locked the door, and returned once more to bed, fully satisfied that it was altogether a false alarm. I soon fell asleep, and did not awake again until seven o'clock in the morning, the usual hour for rising.

So convinced was I that my fears had been groundless that I still refrained from mentioning the incident either to my sisters or to the mistress of the house, who was the only occupant of it besides ourselves: nor did I think much more of the matter throughout that day. But when the hour for retiring to rest approached, I resolved to have materials in my room for procuring a light in case of necessity. I did not however let either of my sisters know of this proceeding, for fear of alarming them. On retiring to rest I tried to go to sleep, but could not; and therefore speedily accepted as it were the necessity of lying awake.

"Between eleven and twelve," said I to myself, "is the time when those sounds are heard—if indeed they are heard at all otherwise than in the imagination; and therefore I suppose that I must lie awake until I have satisfied myself respecting their reality or their ideality."

But sure enough, at about the same time, as nearly as I could guess, I heard the wonted sound—namely, that of a door opening; and so convinced was I on this occasion of the reality thereof, that I was seized with a mortal terror. What could it possibly be? That Sarah locked her door of a night as

a proper precaution, was evident from its being so fastened when I tried it the preceding night; and it was not at all likely that she would get up and leave her room at such an hour and in so stealthy a manner. Then, what could it be? It was this horrible uncertainty, this terrible suspense, that filled me with consternation; and two or three minutes passed away ere I had power to move. Then all my fortitude seemed to return in an instant; and springing from my bed, I lighted the candle and went out upon the landing. All was still. I tried the door of the front room: it was locked fast as on the previous night. I now hesitated what to do; but at length resolved on knocking gently to ascertain whether Sarah herself had been disturbed. But she did not answer—so I concluded she was fast asleep; and perceiving nothing to confirm my terrors, I thought it a pity to make her share them by arousing her. Then it struck me that I would ascend to the next floor and see if the old landlady had heard anything. I did so—entered her room, the door of which she did not lock—and found her in a deep slumber. Her state was therefore a sufficient answer to the question I meant to have put, had I found her awake; and I crept down again without disturbing her. Re-entering my chamber, I extinguished the light and went to bed again: but it was a long time before I could compose myself to sleep. Then I slept on for hours—and when I opened my eyes again, it was with a start and a thrill of terror, for I caught the sounds of a door closing and a key turning in the lock, but vaguely and dubiously like the end of a dream slipping out of the imagination at the instant when one awakes.

I sat up in bed and listened. All was still, and it was daylight. What could this mean? what were these sounds that I had so often heard—this stealthy opening and shutting of doors, as if some one went out at night and came back in the morning? I felt as if the roots of my hair were actually standing on end with horror, as the conviction was forced upon me that if it were any one who did this it must be Sarah—my own sister Sarah—and none other. I was shocked at the idea, and endeavoured to put it away from me as if it were some hideous thing that persisted in rising up before my eyes. But I could not. Back would come the thought with fresh power, the more I endeavoured to repel it, till it settled almost with the firmness of a conviction in my mind. O heavens! what dared I think? that one so young——but no, no—it was impossible! I felt that I must not judge hastily, nor even make an accusation too shocking if it should prove untrue. What course, then, was I to adopt? Still to remain silent before my sisters as to what I had heard, but to keep watch when night came again.

Such was the plan I resolved upon; and the day which I now passed was one of the most wretched of my whole existence. Frequently did I find myself gazing intently upon Sarah's superbly handsome countenance, and wondering whether it were possible that she could be capable of a terrible duplicity—I dared not think of anything worse! Once or twice she observed that I thus regarded her; and methought she became slightly troubled: but if so, she instantaneously regained her composure, and I was compelled to conclude that her looks really proved nothing. It was not only one of the most wretched but also one of the longest days I ever passed; and during all those mortal hours which moved onward with such leaden feet, was I tortured with the most harrowing suspense,—maintaining an incessant struggle against apprehensions to which I dared not yield, but which nevertheless kept forcing themselves like grisly phantoms upon my thoughts. How I managed to conceal the state of my mind throughout that live-long day from my two sisters, is more than I can conceive: but I suppose that I did so, as neither of them noticed that I was at all dull, or dispirited, or restless.

Night came at length — the church-clock proclaimed the hour of ten—and I retired with Jane to the back chamber. I distinctly heard Sarah lock her own door as usual, immediately after we thus quitted her room. Jane soon disapparelled herself, and was in bed. I made some excuse for not immediately undressing, and talked to her till she went to sleep: then seating myself in a chair close by the door, I listened. I heard the clock strike eleven, and I said to myself, "In another half-hour, if it occurs at all!"

As the moment approached when my fears must be either confirmed or dissipated, the most cruel restlessness grew upon me — a feverish excitement amounting to a perfect agony. It seemed as if millions of pins were pricking me all over, so intensely did the blood tingle in my veins. But all of a sudden this dreadful heat was turned into an ice-chill, as my ear caught the unmistakable sounds of the key turning in the lock of Sarah's door,—turning too with that gradual slowness which indicates extreme caution. Still I moved not, but continued to listen. The door was opened—the key was taken out—I heard a rustling of garments, and a slight creaking of the boards in the passage beneath gently treading footsteps. Then the door was closed—the key was introduced into the lock on the outside—it turned, and was withdrawn again. Now my worst fears seemed confirmed; and I was about to start up, tear open my own chamber door, and burst forth upon my sister. But at that instant an important consideration restrained me. Were I to do so, it must be accompanied by disturbance—the landlady would be alarmed—exposure must follow—and my sister's reputation would be ruined beyond redemption. That would be horrible! And yet what was to be done? An interposing hand must be stretched out to rescue the unhappy girl from whatsoever course she was pursuing; and at the same time utter secrecy must be observed.

My resolve was promptly taken. I would follow her! To put on my bonnet and shawl was the work of a moment: but as I issued from my chamber, my ear caught the sound of the front door closing gently. Stealthily did I creep down the stairs: and if I had any lingering doubt before as to whether my sister, or at least some one, had gone forth, it was now totally dispelled, for I found the bolts of the front door drawn back, and the key itself was taken way, evidently for the purpose of opening the door again for re-admittance at a later hour. I went forth from the house, closing that door as noiselessly as possible behind me. The night was dark—but not too dark to prevent me from distinguishing a female figure moving rapidly along the street at a little distance. My first impulse was naturally to overtake Sarah as quickly as possible, and thus personally prove to her my knowledge of

her misconduct: but then it struck me that a girl who could be so consummate a hypocrite in the management of her evil proceedings, would, when discovered, be equally bold in defying and resisting a sister's authority. Oh! how bitterly my heart was wrung on making this reflection: and it was a most natural one. To reclaim her, I thought, it would be necessary to probe the whole affair to the depth of its terrible mystery; and I accordingly resolved to follow her unperceived. Therefore, keeping her in view, I crept stealthily along where the shade of the houses was darkest, so that if she looked back she might not perceive that she was being followed. In a few minutes she turned into the street where Mrs. Whitfield's deserted house was situated; and suddenly I lost sight of her altogether. I hastened on to the spot where she had thus disappeared from my view, and found myself at the entrance of a narrow alley the existence of which I had not at the first moment remembered, but which separated the deserted house from the one next to it and led down to the back gates of both of them. That Sarah had entered the alley I was now certain; and I crept stealthily along the narrow avenue, which was as dark as pitch. I heard a gate open and shut: so I went on and tried the latch of the gate communicating with the back yard of the deceased Mrs. Whitfield's house. It opened—and just as I entered the yard into which it led, my ears caught the sound of a door closing somewhere about the premises.

Thus far, then, had I traced my sister! And now I experienced a feeling of relief; for it seemed impossible that she could have come hither for any purpose such as I had at first naturally supposed to be the one that could alone have enticed her away from her home in the darkness of the night and in so stealthy a manner. But what on earth could have brought her to the shut-up house? Ah! the truth suddenly flashed to my comprehension; and the relief which I had a minute before experienced, suddenly grew unspeakably great. My sister might be avaricious—covetous—but, thank heaven, she was not criminal in a deeper sense! Now then, how was I to proceed? If I were to follow her into the house, might I not cause her the most serious alarm? And yet I had no other alternative: for be it understood that I myself was shut out from the lodgings and could only regain admittance by means of the key which Sarah had brought away with her. I was therefore compelled to continue my pursuit of her at all risks.

Through the dimness of the night I found my way to a door opening into the back part of the house: it was not fastened, and I therefore concluded it to be the one which I had heard closing as I entered the yard. So I passed very quietly into the building, and was now in utter darkness. I was groping my way onward when I suddenly heard a shriek thrilling from an upper room, and then my sister Sarah's voice speaking with the rapidity and passionate vehemence of earnest entreaty. The wildest terror gave wings to my feet—a terror on her account only, for I was at the moment utterly unmindful of myself. Fortunately my hand encountered the bannisters of the stairs; and flying up them, I reached the hall-passage. Guided by the piteous supplications of my sister, which still continued, I sped up the next flight—then another—and now a dim light gleamed from an open door on the second storey. I rushed into the room—and there I beheld Sarah upon her knees, at the feet of the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge!

"Mary, save me, save me!" shrieked the terrified girl, and springing up, she flew towards me.

"Well, by jingo, this is the queerest start I ever saw in all my life!" exclaimed the Bulldog. "A moment ago young Sarah vowed and protested that no one knew she had come here——"

"And she told you then," said I, "what she believed to be the truth. But I watched her—I followed her—and now I will take her away with me!"

"Ah! but there's two words to that question though," growled the Bulldog, who held a bludgeon in his hand.

"Yes—that there is," added Sawbridge, who carried a dark lantern and a bunch of objects which no doubt were skeleton-keys and pick-locks.

"O Mary, Mary! what shall we do?" cried Sarah, clinging to me in frantic terror.

"They will not hurt us," said I, looking steadily at the two men and thus speaking *at* them also. "No—they will not hurt us. Of what use would it be to them to do an injury to two helpless females, who came not hither to do them harm?"

"Ah! but what about the treasure?" growled the Bulldog: and he looked down upon the floor as he spoke.

I now observed what appeared to be a long black mark upon the floor, of about four feet in length and eight inches in width, but which at a second glance I perceived to be an opening from which a portion of a plank had been lifted.

"I begin to understand what you mean," said I. "Mrs. Whitfield's hidden treasure is discovered. For heaven's sake keep it all for yourselves—do with it what you like—but let my sister and me go hence unhurt!"

"Yes—and give information to the beaks tomorrow morning," growled the Bulldog, savagely.

"And so raise a hue and cry arter us," added Sawbridge, likewise with a menacing look.

"Let us depart," I said, now very seriously frightened, and feeling that my fortitude was abandoning me; "and we will not give utterance to a word that shall interfere with your plans."

"Well, if we was sure of that," observed Sawbridge, less cruel and bloodthirsty than his companion, "we might——eh, Ben?"

"I don't know what to say about it," was the gruff response; and the fellow seemed to grasp his bludgeon with a firmer hold.

"It would not be the first time," I immediately said in a significant tone, "that I have held my peace respecting your misdeeds."

"That's true enow!" immediately observed Sawbridge, as if appealing on our behalf.

"Well then, if you and your sister both promise to keep quiet," said the Bulldog, "about this here matter, and not mention it to a soul, me and Nick will stand the risk of letting you go scot free."

"You can believe me when I give you that promise, both for myself and sister," said I: and I at once knew by the Bulldog's looks that our lives were now safe.

"Well then," he exclaimed, "you must both stay here till me and Sawbridge are clean out of the place, so that we may have the start of you."

Poor Sarah now at length began to breathe more freely: but still she clung to me, as if in me alone was her safety centred. The Bulldog knelt down, and from the hollow in the floor ladled out with his hands a quantity of gold, which by the size of the heap I should think could not have been less than four or five hundred pounds: and now I heard Sarah heave a deep sigh as the feeling of covetousness returned in proportion as that of terror evaporated. The Bulldog wrapped up one portion of the gold in his own handkerchief, and consigned it to his pocket: Sawbridge did the same by the other portion—and again did Sarah sigh as the treasure disappeared from her view,—that treasure which she had come to seek, but which had thus fallen into the hands of others!

Now when I reflect upon that night's scene, and can look calmly back upon all its details, it occurs to me that it must have been one which a painter might have chosen to delineate upon his canvass. There were two lights in the room—one the lantern of the ruffians, the other a candle. The shutters were all barricaded up, and the draperies drawn over the windows. The interior of the chamber itself was in the utmost confusion, every article of furniture being out of its place, and the carpet removed from the floor and thrust up into one corner. The bedding was all bundled off upon the floor—the cupboards stood open, their contents tossing about—and the whole appearance of the place showed how completely it had been ransacked. As it was a very old house the walls were of wainscot; and to such an extent had the search after the treasure been carried, that whole panels were removed. In the midst of all this scene of confusion, the light of the lamp and candle threw out the figures of Sawbridge and the Bulldog into bold relief, playing upon their hideous countenances which now expressed the greedy satisfaction of successful covetousness. In the farthest corner, to which we had retreated, were Sarah and myself,—she still clinging to me, but gazing with looks of more disappointment than terror upon the two ruffians as they secured the gold about their persons. Altogether, it was a scene well adapted for the canvass of a painter.

Having self-appropriated the gold in the manner described, Sawbridge and the Bulldog exchanged a few rapid words in a flash language utterly incomprehensible to us; and Sarah gazed up with renewed terror into my countenance, doubtless fancying that the ruffians were deliberating whether they should not recant their promise and take our lives. I also was stricken with misgiving: but our suspense was not of long duration; for the Bulldog, turning towards us, said, "But there's one more condition besides holding your tongues, that we must insist upon."

"Name it," said I: for well knowing the desperate characters of those dreadful men, I felt it imperiously necessary to yield to almost any terms which they might stipulate, so long as consistent with honour and propriety.

"Why, you see," rejoined the Bulldog, "me and Sawbridge have changed our minds in one respect. We first thought of cutting away from Ashford again without delay, so as to live like gen'lemen elsewhere upon our fortune:"—and he tapped his coat pocket, making the gold chink within:—"that is to say, as long as it lasts. But now we have made up our minds to stay in Ashford a little bit longer, and ransack this old house thoroughly from top to bottom. What I want to say then is, that we look upon it as our property; and so, if either of you gals dare think of coming here any more, you'll get your throats cut from ear to ear—and that's all about it."

At this horrible threat Sarah gave utterance to a subdued shriek, and clung to me with the utmost tenacity. I also was seized with a cold horror; and if I had wished to make any observation, I should not have been able to give utterance to a word. The Bulldog and Sawbridge now again spoke a few words in their own flash tongue; and immediately afterwards the former said, as if in continuation of his previous remarks, "So, in consequence of the resolution me and Nick have come to, it's not necessary for you two gals to stay here no longer. Mind, Mary Price, you have as good as swore not to blab about this here business; and if we didn't think you was a young woman of honour we should slit your windpipe to make sure. But beware! If we hear in the town the least whisper about anybody coming to this old house—or if we even think ourselves watched or dogged—we shall at once set it down to you or your sister; and by jingo! even if we was in the hands of the constables, we would get away from them if it was only to make both of you squeak with a knife stuck in your throats for having betrayed us. So now bundle off both of you, and mind what I have said."

While the wretch was thus speaking, Sarah gazed upon him in speechless horror, her arms encircling my waist. My own sensations were those of a sickening faintness, mingled with consternation. It was not merely the language of that man which was so frightful: but there was something so cold-blooded and brutally ferocious in his looks that methought he even longed to do the deeds which he threatened. When he had done speaking, therefore, neither Sarah nor myself required to be enjoined twice to take our departure; and even as we hurried down the stairs I dreaded lest the two miscreants, repenting of their forbearance, should spring after us—seize upon us—and by taking our lives, fancy that they were making their own position all the more secure. But we succeeded in emerging from the house in safety; and never perhaps was the fresh air inhaled with a more exquisite sensation of relief than by Sarah and myself as we found ourselves in the open street again.

I did not say a word either of reproach or inquiry to my sister as we proceeded homeward. I thought anything in the shape of remonstrance to be unnecessary for the moment, after the fearful lesson which she had just received; and moreover I was too unfeignedly rejoiced at our escape to have it in my heart to utter an angry word. Nor less was I gratified at the clearing-up of a mystery which had for a time filled me with such dread apprehensions relative to Sarah, but the elucidation of which proved that she had been more foolish than culpable—and at all events not culpable in a way damaging to the purity of her reputation. As for inquiry, I resolved to wait until we reached home for such explanations as were still needed to fill up the gaps in the history of her proceedings. On her part, Sarah remained equally silent, ashamed no doubt, not-

withstanding her self-willed disposition, of the whole tenour of her conduct.

We reached our lodgings, and entered them unobserved, Sarah having the key of the house-door with her; and cautiously did we ascend the stairs. I could not bear the idea of our thus stealing like midnight thieves into the place: but it could not be helped. On reaching the front room we closed the door and threw off our bonnets and shawls. Then we sat down together in the dark—for I would not light a candle at that time of night: and I said, "Now, Sarah, if you feel tired and overcome, I will not ask you to sit up and talk to me."

"No, Mary," she answered, "I would rather tell you at once all that I have to say and that you must wish to know, so that when we meet in the morning there may be no unkind looks on your part. Dear Mary, I hope you will forgive me for the cruel anxieties I must have caused you and the terrible dangers into which you have been led."

As she thus spoke, Sarah threw her arms around my neck and embraced me with greater warmth and fondness than it was usual for her somewhat callous nature to display. So I at once assured her of my forgiveness, at the same time begging and imploring that the adventures of the night might serve as a warning for her not to dare any such perils in future. She promised that she would attend to my advice, and assured me that the warning itself was sufficient to make her do so. She then gave me a narrative of her proceedings, which I now lay before the reader:—

"From a variety of circumstances, I all along felt convinced that Mrs. Whitfield had some secret hoard of money; and you may perhaps remember how actively I assisted in the search that was made throughout the premises after the funeral. It was while you were at Dover that I seriously thought of paying a secret visit to the house, and instituting a farther search. I knew very well that if I spoke to William upon the subject he would not enter into my views; and Jane was of course too young either to be made a confidant or assist me in the enterprise. Equally vain I knew it to be to seek your co-operation, Mary, when you came back from Dover; and gradually the resolve settled in my mind that I would dare the adventure alone. Do not misunderstand me, Mary, in the ideas which I entertained upon the subject that thus haunted me. When I determined to penetrate into the shut-up house by night, it was not to appropriate to myself a single article to which I did not feel I was morally entitled—no, not so much as a riband or a bit of lace, or the most trifling nick-nack from any of the rooms, would I have taken. It was the will or else the hidden treasure that I sought—or rather both: and as the lawyer and Mr. Collins had given up for our use the little ready money that was left after the funeral expenses, I thought for the same reason that any other sum of money found upon the premises would with equal reason be legitimately our's. Besides, I also felt assured that Mrs. Whitfield must have made some will; as she certainly never could have treated me and Jane with so much kindness if she had not meant to provide for us. All these considerations led me on to resolve upon a farther search of the house. But I could not commence until you returned, because I and Jane slept together during your absence, and I dared not leave her for several hours at a time, with the chance of her awaking and finding that I was not lying by her side. So I waited till you came back; and then I began to put the scheme into execution. I remembered that the gate leading into the back yard was bolted inside, and that a padlock had been put upon it outside. To pass this door was therefore the great difficulty: for I had already settled in my mind a means of entering the house if I could once obtain access into the yard. I went and examined that back-gate in the day-time, and soon satisfied myself that the ring in which the bolt of the padlock was fastened, could be unscrewed with a little effort. I also examined the wall of the yard, and saw the possibility of climbing over it. Satisfied with my researches, I was more than ever determined to dare the enterprise. It was on the second night after your return from Dover that I crept stealthily forth at about half-past eleven, and hurried away to the shut-up house, provided with a large stout nail and with materials for striking a light. By means of the nail I unscrewed the ring into which the padlock was fastened. Then I attempted to climb the wall: but this was far more difficult than I had previously supposed, and once or twice I was alarmed by the people belonging to the next house coming up the alley. At last however I succeeded in getting over into the yard, but not without many contusions, and even at the risk of spraining my ankles seriously, as I lowered myself on the inner side of the wall. However, I had succeeded thus far, and was encouraged to go on. I have already told you that, once within the enclosure, I knew how to enter the house. By climbing on the water-butt I got on the top of the pantry, which projects from the back of the house. The staircase window, to which there are no shutters outside, looks upon the pantry-roof: some boards had been nailed up inside when the house was barricaded; but I saw the carpenter putting up those boards at the time, and had noticed that they were merely secured with nails and not with screws. Being put up inside the house too, I had calculated that it would not be difficult to force one of those boards from its place, as I was enabled to push against it from the outside. Opening the window, I did push with all my might, and succeeded by the help of the large nail also, in dislodging one of the planks; and thus I effected an entry. Closing the window again, I replaced the plank in its setting—struck a light—and was now free to commence my researches inside the house. So much time had however been lost in accomplishing the entry, that I did not on this first occasion remain more than an hour in the building: besides which, I felt afraid in the utter loneliness of that deserted house where death had so lately been. To issue forth again was now a very easy matter. The keys had been left in the locks of all the doors, inside the house, the front one alone excepted. Descending to the kitchen-premises, I unlocked and unbolted the back door, and thus emerged forth into the yard again. I had only now to lock that door on the outside, and conceal the key in some spot where I could find it again, so as to ensure me prompt entrance into the house on the occasion of my next visit. I then drew back the bolts of the yard-gate from which I had previously removed the padlock on the outer side, so that I had no difficulty

in getting out into the alley once more. Screwing the ring in again, I left the door to all appearances just as I found it, so that no one passing by in the day-time could possibly suspect that an entry had been achieved. Regaining the lodgings, I entered without being noticed, and went to bed well wearied with the work I had done. On the following night I stole out again, and returned to the house. I had now nothing to do but unscrew the ring in order to enter the yard, and to open the back door with the key to obtain admittance into the building. Again did I feel the loneliness of the place; but overcoming my alarms I recommenced my researches in good earnest. In the excitement of my proceedings I soon lost all sense of loneliness, and rather gloried in what I was doing. Every nook, crevice, and corner that I could think of, did I search—taking up all the carpets to examine the floors, tossing all the things out of the cupboards to discover any possible hiding-place where the supposed treasure or will might be concealed. Till nearly daylight did I thus pursue my investigations, without the slightest success. On the following night I went back again under the same circumstances as before; and now I resolved to pursue my search principally in the deceased lady's bed-room. Having vainly peered and pryed into every conceivable nook, I resolved upon taking down, if possible, some of the panels of the wainscot: for I have read in books of the strange places in which miserly persons have been known to deposit their hoards. It was even more easy than I had at first anticipated, to remove the panels: for the wood-work was so completely decayed that in many parts it broke into small pieces and crumbled to dust where I inserted the large nail. The fire-irons assisted me in wrenching out the panels; and I can assure you that I worked so hard that I was obliged to sit down and rest: but all my laborious endeavours seemed to be thrown away. For each successive night, however, have I renewed my visits to that house, no longer feeling the least sensation of terror in remaining for so many hours alone in the gloomy-looking dreary place, but alarmed only lest you, Mary, should by any means discover my proceedings. It was not, however, until to-day that I really apprehended you suspected anything: but when I saw you regard me in a strange manner several times, I felt very uneasy. Yet I thought to myself that if you did really entertain any suspicion, you would speak out at once: so I reassured myself by the belief that as I looked pale perhaps, through want of rest at nights, you were struck by my appearance. Accordingly I was not deterred from renewing my visit to the house this night. Entering in the usual manner, I lighted my candle and ascended straight up to Mrs. Whitfield's bed-room: but conceive the terror and dismay with which I was stricken, when on rushing in my eager haste into that chamber, I beheld *another* light and found myself face to face with those two dreadful men Sawbridge and the Bulldog! They themselves were for a moment seized with amazement on recognizing me: for of course they knew very well who I was. A glance upon the floor showed me that these men had at a single search—(for there is no reason to suppose that they had ever penetrated thither before)—discovered what I had vainly been seeking for night after night. A piece of one of the flooring-planks was removed, and the light of the lantern which Sawbridge held in his hand, was reflected in a heap of gold lying at the bottom of the hollow thus revealed. Scarcely however had I caught a glimpse of the treasure, when the Bulldog lifted his club, as I thought to kill me; and he began muttering some threats of terrible import. I fell upon my knees, screaming for that help which I little thought would come: but in a few moments you burst in, and perhaps saved my life."

Such was Sarah's narrative: and when she had concluded it, I said to her, "Before you commenced your explanations you asked for my forgiveness, and I promised it to you, so that we may meet with untroubled looks in the morning. I therefore will not postpone, late though it now be, a few remarks which I think it necessary to make upon all you have told me. There are, my dear Sarah, but two good qualities which you have manifested throughout these adventures of your's: and those are courage and perseverance. For the future let them be exercised in a better cause and for worthier purposes, in which case they will materially aid you in your journey through life. But on the other hand, your whole conduct develops numerous bad features in juxtaposition with those two redeeming ones. For instance, the sentiment that first moved you was a covetousness of the most reprehensible character. Secondly, it was only by a wretched sophistry on your part that you persuaded yourself into the belief that if you found the gold you would have a right to self-appropriate it: for although the lawyer and Mr. Collins thought there was no harm in devoting to your use the few guineas remaining over after the payment of the funeral expenses, the same argument would not have applied to any important sum, which could no more be rightfully yours than the furniture itself or the money left in the Bank of England. Thirdly, you displayed a very great duplicity in undertaking an enterprise which you knew from the first would not be sanctioned by me or William. Fourthly, you were guilty of mingled deceit and imprudence in stealing out of the house at night, thereby acting hypocritically towards me, and in a manner calculated to peril your own reputation beyond the power of redemption. Fifthly, the various methods by which you entered the shut-up house show a combination of artifices of which it is lamentable to think a girl of your age can be capable: and sixthly, you have committed the most serious offence against all notions of honour and propriety in wilfully destroying even so much as a single panel in the wainscot of a house which does not belong to you, but for which an heir may sooner or later appear. These, Sarah, are my opinions upon all the various details of your conduct; and if I have spoken with seeming harshness, the severity of my words exists rather in their frankness than in the more angry feeling."

That my remonstrances touched Sarah deeply there cannot be the slightest doubt; for she threw her arms round my neck, weeping and sobbing upon my bosom. I embraced her with the warmest affection, beseeching and imploring that for our dear departed mother's sake she would exercise a proper discipline over her conduct in all things. She gave me faithful promises; and we separated for the remainder of the night. I found Jane fast asleep; and lying down beside her, endeavoured to woo the presence of slumber also. But a matter of serious

importance now rose up in my thoughts. Was I to suffer the Bulldog and Sawbridge to continue ransacking the deceased Mrs. Whitfield's house without giving the slightest information upon the subject? It was true that I had made some promises under the influence of terror and when feeling myself and my sister to be utterly at the mercy of those ruffians: but it appeared to me even better to break any such promise than to remain a silent accessory to the work of plunder that was going on. I came to the conclusion to consult Mr. Collins in the morning; and having thus settled the matter in my mind, fell asleep.

Something however occurred during the night which rendered it unnecessary for me to take any farther notice of the matter. It seems that the shutters of the front bed-chamber windows were not so well barricaded, nor the curtains so closely drawn, as to prevent the lights of the lamp and candle from glimmering through the chinks in the woodwork. Several gentlemen, returning home late from a dinner-party, perceived those lights; and instantaneously suspecting that robbers were on the premises, they gallantly resolved to institute a search. The front-door being closed, they went round to the back entrances; and finding them unfastened, entered the building. Sawbridge and the Bulldog hearing persons in the house, put out the lights and remained perfectly quiet, doubtless in the hope of finding an opportunity to slip off. But one of the gentlemen procured a lantern from the next house; and on joining his companions, they all ascended together to search the premises, arming themselves with such weapons as the fire-irons supplied. The Bulldog and Sawbridge were discovered—a desperate struggle ensued—but the two villains were overpowered and their treasure was taken from them. They were then handed over to the care of constables and placed in the cage for the rest of the night. Next morning they were put into a cart, bound hand and foot, to be conducted to the nearest magistrate who lived about a mile and a half from Ashford: but on the way thither they managed to break their bonds, and after a fierce struggle with the constables, got clear off. In respect to their entry into Mrs. Whitfield's house, it appeared that they had gained admission by picking the lock of the front door, which was not bolted within, as it was the door by which the persons last issuing from the house had come forth at the time the premises were barricaded up.

The above intelligence respecting the Bulldog and Sawbridge I learnt from the landlady of the lodgings as I was upon the point of sallying forth to consult Mr. Collins: but there now was no necessity to do so, as it was pretty evident that the Bulldog and Sawbridge would not make their appearance again in that part of the country for a long time to come.

CHAPTER LII.

MY FIFTH PLACE.

Amongst the answers which now shortly came to the second insertion of advertisements relative to Sarah, was one that seemed to suit. It was from Lady Talbot, who resided at Talbot Abbey, about six miles from Ashford. She represented in her letter that she had three little girls, whose ages were respectively five, seven, and eight, and for whom she required a young person of the description set forth in the advertisement. Mr. Collins was not personally acquainted with Sir Richard and Lady Talbot: but he knew them by name and repute, and from what he had heard concerning them, thought that Sarah could not do better than look after the situation. He wrote a letter containing such particulars relative to our family, and especially the circumstances under which Sarah had received a superior education, as he thought might be recommendatory; and provided with this credential, Sarah and I proceeded by a carrier's van to the immediate vicinity of Talbot Abbey. As my sister's history will presently have in some respects to be blended with my own, I shall not now enter into any details respecting either the Abbey or its owners. Suffice it to say that we had an interview with Lady Talbot—that she was perfectly satisfied with the answers we gave to all her questions—and that Sarah was engaged as nursery-governess at a handsome salary.

Two days afterwards, Sarah entered her first place; and I and Jane were now alone at the lodgings together. Sarah being thus disposed of, I lost no time in looking out for a situation for myself, and in the usual manner mentioned the circumstance to the most respectable tradesmen with whom I was acquainted in Ashford. As November was now approaching (it being already the middle of August) the reader cannot be surprised if I resolved to take a situation either in the town or at no great distance from it; and in a few days I heard of something that appeared likely to suit me.

About a mile from Ashford there stands a very pretty house, in the midst of grounds consisting of about eight or ten acres, beautifully laid out in paddock and gardens. This house, after remaining empty for five or six years, had recently been taken by a French Count, who had married an English lady; and the building having been put into thorough repair, quantities of handsome furniture came down from London under the superintendence of a housekeeper, a butler, and two or three other servants. It appeared that the lady was a widow at the time the Count de Montville married her some few months previous to the date of which I am writing; and she had two children by her former marriage. The nursemaid who was to accompany the family from London, had disappointed them by taking it into her head to get married all of a sudden instead of remaining in service; and as everything was arranged at the time for the departure of the family from the metropolis, they had not chosen to wait to provide themselves with another nursemaid. They accordingly came down to Ashford without one; and it was of this place that I now heard. I proceeded to the Willow House, as it was called from the circumstance of having a beautiful piece of water in the middle of the lawn surrounded by weeping willows. The interior of the house was not yet altogether relieved of the confusion attendant upon the family's arrival; and upholsterers were still engaged in finishing their work, putting up splendid glasses, chandeliers, and pictures in the drawing-rooms, and completing the

decorations. The hall too was crowded with packages, so that it seemed as if a day or two must yet elapse ere the place could be put altogether to rights.

It was about noon when I called at the Willow House, and was conducted into the back drawing-room, where all the arrangements were completed. The Countess was seated upon a sofa. She was a lady of about thirty, remarkably handsome, with a fine figure, a good complexion, and dark brown hair of exceeding luxuriance. The first glance showed me that though perfectly ladylike, she was vain, and could be proud almost to haughtiness. I also discovered, ere I had been many minutes in her presence, that she was somewhat weak-minded, and though still too intelligent to be nauseatingly affected, she nevertheless had adopted all the airs of the aristocratic rank of *Countess* to which she had risen by marriage. She spoke in a half-condescending, half-patronizing manner, not only to impress my mind with the necessity of paying her all the deference and respect due to her lofty position, but likewise to make me feel that if there were kindness in her words I ought to appreciate with gratitude this unbending demeanour on her part.

The Count de Montvillo was lounging idly in a chair, caressing a beautiful pointer dog with one hand, and twirling his glossy black moustache with the other. He was apparently about forty years of age, and what is called a very fine man. He was at least six feet in height—not very stout, but symmetrical in his proportions. His hair was black, without the slightest streak of grey, but thin upon the crown of the head, as if with incipient baldness; he wore it somewhat long, and it curled naturally over his coat-collar. He was elegantly dressed, and displayed a profusion of jewellery—methought rather too much for good taste and high breeding: but then it struck me that the ideas of the French nobility might differ from those of the English in

this respect. Besides, he was evidently a perfect gentleman in his manners, which might indeed be described as something more than refined and polished: they were absolutely fascinating. He spoke English exceedingly well, although a peculiar accentuation and an occasional singularity of idiom showed that it was not his native tongue. His voice was harmonious; and he seemed to know it very well, for he modulated its tones so as to give the best effect to their masculine melody. He likewise appeared very proud of a splendid set of teeth, the whiteness of which was set off to still greater advantage by a moustache which any officer in the Life Guards might have envied. But his hands struck me as being somewhat coarse and clumsy, even to ugliness;—and minutely to criticise all the details of his external appearance, this was the only fault that could be found with it. His complexion was dark: his eyes were black and remarkably brilliant, with a quickness in the glances that bordered upon restlessness; but when he fixed his look upon my countenance it seemed to pierce me through and through.

The Countess de Montville, having asked me the usual questions relative to my name, age, qualifications, and former places, inquired for my references. I placed Miss Nibkins' written character in her hand, adding that I was well known in Ashford, and that several respectable persons would gladly speak in my behalf. The Countess was perfectly satisfied, and of her own accord proposed very liberal wages.

"I make it a rule," she observed, "to pay all my domestics handsomely; not only because the fortune of his lordship, coupled with my own, enables us to do so, but because we are determined to allow no excuse nor apology for any of those meannesses and pettinesses to which servants so often have recourse in order to swell their emoluments. Besides, you must always be very neatly and nicely dressed; as it is his lordship's resolve as well as my own, that our servants shall be a credit to our establishment—is it not so, Victor?"

"To be sure, my dear—to be sure, my sweet love," replied the Count, with uxorious suavity of tone and caressing fondness of manner.

"You see, Mary," continued the Countess, "that his lordship is resolved to have everything consistent with his rank and fortune; and as we shall be visited by all the nobility and gentry of Kent—that is to say, for miles around—it is imperative that our servants should maintain the most creditable appearance——is it not so, Victor?"

"To be sure, my sweet love—to be sure," answered the Count, with an extra twirl of his moustache. "We shall only keep the very best society."

"You hear what his lordship says, Mary?" continued the Countess, again turning towards me. "As for the children, I need not observe that you will pay the strictest attention to them. Perhaps indeed it may be as well to inform you, if you have not heard it already, that although his lordship loves them as dearly——"

"The sweet little darlings!" interjected the Count, who seemed most assiduous in thinking of anything to say that could please and gratify his wife.

"Dear Victor," observed the lady aside, in a half-whisper and with a fond doting look, "you are so kind!"

"Well, well, my dear, it is my nature, I suppose," observed his lordship complacently; and lolling still farther back in the chair he bestowed the blandest smiles upon his wife, at the same time continuing to caress the pointer dog.

"You understand, Mary," resumed the Countess; "his lordship is the children's step-father: but you must not take it amiss if I tell you that he will maintain as jealous an eye upon their mode of treatment and their well-being as I shall myself."

"I can assure you, ma'am," I observed, "that——"

"Stop, young woman!" said the Countess, now drawing herself up to her full height and speaking with a grave hauteur. "It is not that I am improperly proud, but a due regard for that rank which a beloved husband has so recently conferred upon me, renders it necessary that I should correct you in respect to your mode of addressing me. I have noticed during our brief conversation that you have three or four times called me *madam*—or rather the abbreviative *ma'am*——"

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," said I, perceiving the error I had committed. "I can assure your ladyship it was an inadvertence on my part."

"So I regarded it — and I am by no means angry," rejoined the Countess, immediately unbending again, and resuming her half-condescending half-patronizing tone and manner. "But it is needful, for the well-being of society, that every one should be addressed according to his or her rank and position——is it not so, Victor?"

"To be sure, my love: you speak admirably, my angel!" responded the gallant husband. "Young woman," he added, turning to me, "you ought to be proud of entering the service of a lady of such high intellect and accomplished mind as the Countess. I am sure you will benefit immensely by her ladyship's example."

"You are too kind, Victor—you really spoil me," said the Countess in another side-whisper, but quite loud enough for me to hear.

"No, no—you can't be spoilt, my sweet: you are too good to be spoilt, my beauty," rejoined the uxorious Count: and as if he thought I was not noticing him at the time, he blew his wife a kiss with the tips of his fingers.

"Now that I think we thoroughly understand each other," resumed the Countess, "or rather I should say, you thoroughly understand the wishes of his lordship and myself, I have no more to say to you at present. When can you come? This evening, I hope."

"I should have liked, if it suited your ladyship," was my answer, "to have one day to pay my respects, according to promise, to Mr. and Mrs. Twisden—with whom, as I have already informed your ladyship, I lived some time."

"Are they first-rate people?" inquired the Countess: "do they live in good style? and are they visited by all the best society? In a word, do they keep their carriage?"

"They are very wealthy, my lady, and keep their carriage," was my answer. "At the time I was with them, they were visited by the first families in Kent."

"Then they are sure to call upon us," observed the Countess; "and so you will have an opportunity of paying your respects to them here. And by the bye, now that I think of it, I am very glad you are

so well acquainted with the names of all the first families in the county; because if any who do not belong to the highest grade should take it into their heads to call upon us, you can give me a hint as to their real standing. For we do not mean to know any except carriage-people——I mean families who keep their carriage——do we, Victor?"

"No, surely, my love—it would be preposterous, my angel," at once replied the Count, as he caressed his moustache. "In these times when there are so many upstarts, adventurers, and *parvenus* springing up in society, like what do you call them? ——Ah! mushrooms——"

"A very excellent simile, my dear Victor," observed the Countess. "Oh, what a brilliant intellect you do possess!" she added aside, in another whisper; and again she fixed a look of doting fondness upon her husband.

"So long as you are satisfied, my angel, I am happy," rejoined the Count. "But what was I saying? Oh, ah, I recollect—I was talking of the necessity of keeping oneself select, and picking and choosing one's friends and acquaintances. This was always my rule in Paris; and indeed I never asked a soul to my table who could not prove that his family dated back at least five hundred years."

"You must have been the ornament and the star of the brilliant circle in which you moved, my dear Victor," said the lady: then in a softer and still more winning tone, she added, "But are you sure that you will like this sort of country-life into which we are now settling down? are you certain that you will not miss the gaieties and pleasures of your own delightful capital?"

"No, my beauty," replied the Count, running his jewelled but very clumsy fingers through his hair: "one gets tired at length of being constantly lionized. It became quite insipid and sickening at last. Not a dinner-party nor a ball was deemed perfect unless the Count de Montville was there! If an elegant pic-nic party was formed to visit any of the delightful woods or groves about Paris, the question always was, 'Will the Count de Montville be with us?'—Even if there was a duel in high life, it was absolutely necessary for the Count de Montville to be one of the seconds; and I perfectly well remember a young Duke—a splendid fellow, with his hundred thousand pounds sterling a-year, his two town mansions and his seven country-seats—in fact, with everything to render existence delightful and make the world charming in his eyes,—I remember, I say, that when he was shot through the lungs—mortally wounded—and dying in my arms, his last words were, 'Ah, my dear De Montville! it is happiness to expire thus with you as my second and my friend.'—Poor fellow!"

"Dear me, how interesting—how romantic!" exclaimed the Countess: "and yet how shocking!" she added, for a moment applying her cambric handkerchief to her eyes. "See what it is to be the pink of fashion—the leading star of high life—the regent, so to speak, of the *beau monde*. How they must miss you in Paris, my dear Victor!"

"To be sure they do, my angel: but they will not get me amongst them again," replied the Count, with an air of decision, as if he thought it by no means unlikely that the whole fashionable world of the French capital would come over on a pilgrimage to England to beg, beseech, and implore that he would lighten the darkness in which he had left them. "You see," he continued, "it was always De Montville—nothing could be done without De Montville. Everybody was crying, 'Where is De Montville?'—No tailor dared start a new fashion for a coat or waistcoat without first obtaining the stamp of De Montville's approval. And by the bye," added his lordship, laughing, "this puts me in mind, my love, of rather a singular anecdote. One morning—I remember that I was just stepping into the Duke de Montmorency's carriage to accompany his Grace to Court—a note was put into my hand. On opening it I found it contained a cheque for ten thousand pounds, speaking in English money, from a fashionable tailor; and the letter stated that he had taken the liberty of forwarding me that little amount to be disposed of in charitable purposes as I might think fit, and begging that I would condescend to order at his establishment a coat of a new and peculiar style which he had just invented. Don't you see the rogue's drift? The money was a bribe just to get me to patronise him. The cunning fellow! he knew it would be ten thousand pounds very well spent and would make his fortune! But I sent him back his cheque and his letter in a blank envelope, and told my valet to cane him soundly."

Both the Count and the Countess laughed very heartily at this anecdote, which, I must say, at once struck me as savouring somewhat of that description of discourse which is politely termed "drawing the long bow."

"Well, my love, you perceive," the Count went on to observe, "that I was so plied with adulations—so wearied with flatteries—so worn out by being kept in a constant routine of dissipation, pleasure, and gaiety—that after having, I may say without vanity, dazzled the whole Parisian world for some years, I was at lenth glad to escape from such a killing life."

"Killing life! what a beautiful expression! what a world of thought in that simile!" exclaimed the Countess, in a tone of raptured approval. "Well, my dear Victor, I think you have down wisely to settle down at last in our beautiful England."

"Ah! my angel," interrupted the Count, holding up his forefinger with affectionate archness of remonstrance: "it was your beauty which possessed the talisman to do this. Depend upon it, when all my fashionable friends in Paris come to learn through whose agency I am kept away from them, they will be mightily angry with you—little enchantress that you are!"

"So long as I possess your love," returned the Countess, with another of those side-whispers which I could not possibly help hearing, "I can put up with all the wrath of your Parisian friends."

"And if the Duke of Montmorency, or the Prince de Fontanges, or the Marquis of Bouillon, or the Count of Chateaubriand, should take it into their heads to come over and see what I am doing in this England of your's, you must put on all your sweetest smiles, so as to convince them that I am kept here by attractions which no mortal man with a susceptible heart could possibly resist."

"When we are thoroughly settled, my dear Victor," answered the Countess, "you shall write to some of your illustrious friends and invite them to come and see you. I have sufficient vanity to believe that they will not succeed in taking you away with them."

I do not know how long this style of conversation would have gone on in my presence, had it not been disturbed by the abrupt opening of the door, which made the Count start as if his nerves were somewhat delicate: but when he saw that it was nobody but the charwoman, he looked very angry indeed, and exclaimed, "How dare you thus burst into her ladyship's presence?"

"And into his lordship's too?" added the Countess, with a haughty sternness of look and voice.

The charwoman, who had been engaged to wash out the rooms and help the regular servants in putting things to rights, was a stout elderly woman, with a red nose, watery eyes, and altogether a very gin-drinking look. She had on a dirty night-cap, on the top of which an immense black bonnet was airily perched, looking very much like a japanned coal-scuttle turned upside down. She was attired in an old cotton gown, which had been repaired in several places; and as the original colour of the dress was well nigh washed out, the pieces, though of the same material and even the same pattern, had a much fresher look, thus giving the gown a singular patched appearance. Her apron, which was made of coarse kitchen-towelling, hung on with great strings that did not go round the waist, but were tied loosely round her person lower down. She wore a wintry pair of blue worsted stockings and great clumsy shoes. When at work she trampled about in pattens: but these, as I presently observed, she had left down in the hall ere ascending to the back drawing-room. As to her general shape and figure, a sack of bran tied round the middle with a cord would have been equally graceful and elegant. Her arms, which were bare, had the white and leprous appearance which showed they had just come out of the hot suds. Indeed, the worthy woman had come straight from the process of scrubbing to demand her supply of gin; and she looked altogether damp and moist, in her slovenly draggle-tail garments.

"Beg pardon, sir—beg pardon, mem—for introoding," said the charwoman, as she advanced unconcernedly into the room; "but that there great fat flunky of your'n which calls his-self a butler, says there bain't no gin in the house; and when I tells him it's altogether unpossible for me to get through my work without a drain of sperrit, he told me to go and——but I won't mention the word in genteel company, leastways not afore a lady. What I want to know is whether I bain't to have the reg'lar 'lowances—a pint of beer at eleven, and a glass of gin at twelve, to carry me on to dinner at one? Them's the rules in every respectable house; and that's what I always bargin for."

"Leave the room, woman!" exclaimed the Countess, who seemed to have listened to this tirade in silence, only because indignation choked her power of utterance.

"Yes—but mem, if you please, we must come to a understanding," said the charwoman, pertinaciously adhering to the assertion of what she conceived to be her rights. "I'm quite supplicated by the steam of the biler down in the washus, and it would be raythor orkard for you, mem, if I was taken ill just at the moment when my services is so wallyable."

"Supplicated?" echoed the Countess, almost in dismay. "What does the woman mean? what on earth can she intend to say?"

"I suppose she means *suffocated*, my lady," I ventured to suggest.

"Well, sufficated, then!" thrilled forth the charwoman, eyeing me very indignantly. "I ain't had no hedification as other folks has, and——"

"This is intolerable!" exclaimed the Count. "My dear——"

"Quite intolerable, my love!" cried the Countess. "Mary," she added, turning to me, "ring the bell."

I instantaneously did so; and a footman made his appearance.

"James," said the Countess, "do pray see that this woman does not force herself into his lordship's or my presence again. Here she is, with her dirty shoes treading all over the new carpets——"

"Please your ladyship," replied the footman, "we have done our best to keep Mrs. Dunkley quiet; but she insists upon drinking every half-hour——"

"Oh, the owdacious falsehood!" exclaimed Mrs. Dunkley, the charwoman, throwing up her arms above her coal-scuttle bonnet as if horrified at the dreadful accusation. "There ain't a more soberer woman in all the town than me, or one which is better respected. I have chared for the fust families, and can get certifikits of good conduct from every one, beginning with the parson and goin' down to the parish beadle his-self. Now who, then, will say black's the vite of my hi?"

"For heaven's sake, take her away, James!" cried the Countess. "Does she not already smell dreadfully of liquor?"

"Quite 'orrid, my lady," responded the footman, making a hideous face as he drew back from too close a proximity to the charwoman.

"Then pay her her wages and let her begone," said the Countess, waving her hand imperiously. "Don't you think that is the best, Victor?"

"To be sure, my love—to be sure! You do everything for the best," was the response.

Mrs. Dunkley began a tirade of apologies and excuses, which the footman promptly cut short by seizing her arm and fairly dragging her from the room, whispering however something in her ear that satisfied and appeased her.

"Pah! she has left a terrible odour of spirits behind her," said the Count, turning up his nose in perfect disgust. "Really, my love," he added in a tone of gentle—but *very* gentle rebuke, "you must get rid of these kind of creatures: their presence is perfectly pestilential."

"In future, my dear Victor, you shall stand no chance of being thus annoyed," answered the Countess; then turning to me, she said, "Well, Mary, can you come this evening? for you see the state of confusion we are in, and may therefore judge how unpleasant it is to be without a nursemaid."

"Under those circumstances, my lady," I answered, "I shall of course attend to your ladyship's wishes:"—and thereupon I curtsied and quitted the room.

On regaining the hall, I found James the footman and Mrs. Dunkley the charwoman sitting down very comfortably together, and partaking of a glass of gin; and as the upholsterers were at that very instant bringing a large piece of furniture up the front-door steps, I was compelled to remain standing in the hall until the way was cleared for me to pass out.

"Well, but who be they though, Mr. Jeames?" I heard Mrs. Dunkley ask of the footman; and I could not also help overhearing his reply.

"Why, you see, I've only been a matter of six weeks in their service. It appears they passed the honeymoon at Brighton; and then the moment they got back to London, they fell to hiring us servants and buying all this here furniture what was sent down by the vaggin. They staid at a slap-up hotel at the West End all the time they was making their arrangements; for I heerd say that missus had broke up her own establishment afore the marriage took place."

"She was a widder, warn't she, Mr. Jeames?" asked Mrs. Dunkley; and tossing off a glass of gin she gave a deep sigh or rather gasp of pleasure at the effects of the stimulant.

"Yes, she were a widder," replied the footman. "Her first husband were a clerk in a Government office, but had a little independency of his own, and missus had some money too——"

"Ah! then there's plenty now on both sides, I s'pose?" observed Mrs. Dunkley. "In course, the Count is pretty warm?"

"Tidyish, I should think. Leastways, so they say," replied James: "but I hav'n't heerd tell what his income is. Missus however hinted to her maid that it warn't far short of four thousand a-year. His lordship has got two or three castles in France —shay-toes they call 'em*—and I have heerd that he is going to sell 'em all off and return never no more to his native country. He's desperate fond of missus: and she's desperate fond of him too. As for us servants, we like 'em both well enough; for if they give theirselves a few hairs it's only what rich folks often does; and they don't stint us in our meals, nor nothink of that sort. Besides, they gives us good wages, and seems the right sort of people for behaving generous. Come, old woman, we'll have another glass of gin; and then you must get back to your scrubbing, while I go and give them upholstery chaps a helping hand in getting things to rights."

James and Mrs. Dunkley accordingly partook of another dram, drinking by turns out of the same glass, which had the stand broken off: but scarcely had the footman tossed his *quantum* down his throat, when the Count de Montvillo made his appearance in the hall with the pointer dog at his heels.

"James!" he cried. "Oh, there you are!"

"Yes, my lord:"—and the footman, quickly handing the glass to the charwoman, was on his legs in a moment.

"Why, I do believe that you have been drinking, James, at this hour of the day?" exclaimed the Count somewhat angrily.

"No, my lord—not for the world, my lord," replied the footman with unblushing effrontery.

"Wasn't that a glass I saw you suddenly thrust into the old woman's hands?"

"A glass, my lord?—no, my lord?"

"Then what was it?"

"What was it, my lord? A——a——pot of beeswax, my lord, that I've been using for the furniture."

"Then there seems to be a great deal of spirit in the beeswax," observed the Count, sniffing around him: "for there's a horrible smell of gin in the hall."

"Yes, my lord—horrible!" rejoined James, with a most marvellous coolness. "But the upholsterers recommend it on that account, my lord."

"Oh! very well, if that's the case we must not interfere with them. Why were you sitting down at the moment I entered the hall instead of getting on with the work?"

"Why, my lord, I was merely tying my shoestring," answered James.

"Well, pray look alive," said the Count, "and get the place in order. Where's Tom?"

"He's round in the stables, my lord."

The doorway being now cleared by the introduction of the massive piece of furniture into the hall, I was enabled to pass out of the mansion; and as I retraced my way back into the town, I naturally reflected upon my prospects in my new place. I was glad that I had overheard the account which James the footman gave of his master and mistress, proving as it did that they were kind and indulgent to their servants, notwithstanding the evident faults and foibles which marked their characters. That the Countess had been dazzled by the rank as much as she had been captivated by the handsome person of the French nobleman, there seemed no doubt; and that though intelligent in one sense, she was weak-minded in another—easy to be flattered and cajoled—was likewise apparent. From what I had seen of her I had little doubt she would prove a kind mistress so long as the exactions which her newly acquired rank seemed to demand, were fully complied with. As for the Count himself, I had already seen enough to convince me that he was fond of boasting of his fashionable acquaintances and friends in Paris, and that in so doing he did not adhere very strictly to the truth, but drew somewhat on his imagination for the anecdotes wherewith he seasoned his discourse.

The preparations I had to make before entering my new place, were speedily accomplished. As previously arranged, my sister Jane was consigned to the care of Mr. Collins's housekeeper; and it was a great consolation to me to think that she was so well disposed of, and likewise enjoyed the companionship of her brother William. I passed the remainder of that day at Mr. Collins's abode; and in the evening repaired to the Willow House, a porter following me with my boxes. Thus was I duly installed in my fifth place.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE WILLOW HOUSE.

In a few days the mansion was entirely put to rights; and very splendidly furnished it was. Everything that had been sent down from London was quite new, and of the handsomest description. Not only were the apartments themselves thus sumptuously and elegantly decorated, but all the other appointments and circumstances of the establishment seemed fully to match. The services of plate were all new, massive, and costly; the china was as handsome as any I had seen at Lord Harlesdon's; the cellar was well stocked with the choicest wines; and the fare provided for the table of the

* Mr. James the footman no doubt meant *chateaux*.

Count and Countess was always of the daintiest description.

In the kitchen the provender was proportionately good; and there was nothing in the shape of mean interference with the comforts of the domestics. The coach-house contained a splendid shut-up carriage, and an elegant open phaeton, with the Count's arms emblazoned on the panels. In the stable there were four horses, which, as I overheard the servants saying, were splendid animals, and must have cost a large sum of money. The footman, coachman, and the grooms were furnished with magnificent liveries—a trifle too much bedizened with gold lace, and therefore having a little smack of the *parvenu* style about them. But then this extreme richness in the decoration of the liveries might be the fashion in France; and after all, who could dispute the taste of a nobleman who had been for so many years the reigning star of the *beau monde* in the French capital? To be brief, the establishment displayed every evidence of great wealth; and the circumstance that three or four thousand pounds had been at once paid into the Ashford bank to the account of Monseigneur de Montville, had not failed to get whispered abroad, thus establishing the high respectability and opulence of my new master and mistress.

Why do I say that this circumstance established their respectability? Because it is so in the great world. Let a man only be able to produce his banker's book and show a good balance in his favour there, and is not that a sufficient guarantee for the excellence of his reputation? When the newspapers speak of "a person of the highest respectability," does it mean that every inquiry has been made relative to his private morals, and that the result has shown him to be a good husband, an affectionate father, a sincere friend, and a worthy associate?—does it mean that he has been weighed in the balances and found scrupulously upright, sternly honest, never having wronged a soul, and able to hold his head erect and dare the world to point out a single action of his at which he need blush? No—it means nothing of the sort: it means simply that a man of the highest respectability is one who has got plenty of worldly substance. Money, therefore, in this Mammon-worshipping age and country, is considered to be a sufficient test of respectability—indeed, the *only* test needed. So long as no flagrant crimes can be positively and actually laid to the door of an individual, his countless small vices go for nothing at all, if he have money. Provided he pay his way, have no debts, and can show a balance at his banker's, he is "a highly respectable man." He may beat his wife—cruelly ill-use his children—be the vilest of tyrants to his clerks, his shopmen, or his servants—grind down the poor to the very dust—lend money out at usurious interest—sell the bed from under the widow and the orphan "in the way of business"—be even a drunkard, a swearer, a seducer of innocence, and a secret frequenter of the lowest haunts of vice,—all this he may be, and all these things he may do, but still he loses not his distinction of "a respectable man" so long as he has wealth. Let him pay his money-debts, and the world bothers not itself about the debts which he owes to morality. All his vices, if regarded in their aggregate, may make up a perfect mountain of enormity: but so long as his wealth can gild it over, it only sends forth rays to dazzle the world's eyes and command admiration and flattery.

Pardon this digression, reader; but while speaking of the Count de Montville's circumstances, I would not have you think that I myself judged his respectability by his wealth. I merely wished you to understand that it was the townfolks of Ashford, and not my own private opinion, which regarded the large sum of money at the banker's as an incontrovertible proof of the high respectability of my new master. Not that I entertained any different sentiment when taking up my abode at the Willow House. I had not seen enough of his lordship, and likewise knew too little of his affairs, to be justified in coming to any decision upon the point. But as three or four weeks passed away and everything went on calmly and smoothly—indeed happily—at the mansion, I certainly felt I had every reason to congratulate myself for having found an excellent situation, where I was treated kindly enough.

As the reader has been led to expect from the remarks the Countess de Montville made the first day I saw her, many of the best families about the neighbourhood called at the Willow House. Having been seen at church and invited to a ball at the banker's, it required nothing more to render the Count and Countess de Montville the objects of all kinds of civilities. Day after day did carriages drive up to the Willow House; and between two and five o'clock it was an incessant opening and shutting of the front door—a constant introduction and leave-taking of visitors—in short a scene of gaiety which reminded me more of what used to take place at Harlesdon House in London than anything I had ever before seen in the country. The Count speedily became an almost universal favourite with visitors and guests. He sang a capital song—could play the violin, the flute, and even the piano—could draw beautifully—was well skilled in horse-flesh and the "good points" of dogs—proved himself an excellent sportsman when the shooting season began in September—rode with considerable *eclat* in a steeple chase—was a jovial companion at the dinner-table, though he never drank much himself—could play a good hand at whist and was famous at *ecarte*—professed the Protestant creed, and therefore was regular at the parish-church—gave a donation to the National Sunday School—and paid all his accounts with scrupulous regularity every week. By these varied accomplishments and proceedings, he won the favour of all grades and classes with whom he came in contact. The gentlemen liked him for his manly qualifications—the ladies adored him for his drawing-room tastes and refinements—the tradesmen liked him for his punctuality—the clergyman was flattered by his constant attendance at church—and thus he won golden opinions almost everywhere. As a matter of course the Countess shone in the reflection of her husband's lustre, and was courted, caressed, and flattered as much as himself.

It is true that they gave themselves many aristocratic airs, and faithfully adhered to their resolve of only associating with "carriage people." But then they managed to shake off, as it were, the overtures of acquaintance made by humbler gentlefolks without positively slighting them; so they created few enemies in that quarter, and even those who did feel themselves aggrieved, had too much pride or good

sense to acknowledge it. Towards their inferiors they behaved with that half-patronizing half-condescending manner which was the least calculated to give offence, and to which indeed shopkeepers especially are too much accustomed on the part of the wealthy and great to smart under such a manifestation of aristocratic superiority.

Amongst the visitors who called at the Willow House were Mr. and Mrs. Twisden; and I had an opportunity of paying my respects to them. The little affair which had taken place in respect to Mr. Trips when I was at Twisden Lodge, seemed to have pretty well blown over in the county—partially perhaps out of kindness for old Mr. Twisden himself, and partially because they were rich people, kept their carriage, and gave good dinners. Nevertheless, Mrs. Twisden took an opportunity, when she called at the Willow House, of speaking to me alone; and not without some little confusion of looks and manner she said, "Of course, Mary, you never mentioned the unpleasant little business which took place at the Lodge—I mean when that vulgar person the actor dared make a most untrue and scandalous accusation against me, he being in his cups at the time."

"Accusation, ma'am?" said I, in astonishment: "I certainly heard no accusation——"

"Yes—that I had been an actress or some such vulgar thing," replied Mrs. Twisden, the colour mounting to her very forehead. "But it was all false—a base calumny; and so, as you are a good girl, you will not propagate it."

I assured Mrs. Twisden that I never was given to gossipping, nor had any love for meddling with other persons' affairs. She expressed her approval of these sentiments, and told me that "as she had a great esteem for me she should one of these days make me a present." Of course I did not behave rudely by saying that I would rather not have it: but I thought to myself that it was rather insulting thus to promise me a bribe for not mentioning the little disagreeable circumstance of the past to the inmates of the Willow House.

I have not yet spoken of the Countess's two children; nor is it necessary to say much relative to them. The eldest was a boy of five—the younger a girl of three; they gave promise of inheriting their mother's good looks, and though somewhat "spoilt," were nevertheless sufficiently tractable. Being the issue of a former marriage, they of course bore their father's surname, which was Bartlett: but by some strange misapprehension respecting the degrees of aristocratic rank, or rather the modes in which they applied to the present instance, the Countess had chosen to dub them each "Honourable," just as if they were the children of her second marriage. She seemed resolved that the lustre of her new husband's noble title should shed its beams upon all whom it was in any way possible to thrust within the radiance thereof: so that the boy was styled the Honourable Master Richard, and the little girl was the Honourable Miss Emma. I was the only nursemaid kept—indeed there was no necessity for another; and having nothing to do but attend to the two children, my situation was not a very onerous one. The nursery was my department—my home: I slept and took my meals there, having but little intercourse with the other domestics. The Countess was at first very particular in seeing that the children were treated according to her wishes: but when she found that I implicitly obeyed all her instructions, she gradually ceased to bestow her direct superintendence upon the nursery. The children very soon became attached to me; and thus, all things considered, I was happy and contented enough in my new place.

To continue the thread of my narrative, it will be necessary to remind the reader that the Willow House had been shut up for nearly six years before it was taken by the Count and Countess de Montville. Indeed, it had fallen into a sad state of dilapidation and decay at the time when they saw an advertisement in a London newspaper, announcing "those eligible premises, near the delightful market-town of Ashford, in one of the most salubrious parts of Kent, famed as the garden of England," to be let on lease for a certain term of years. The Count, as I learnt, had come down to look at the house; and being pleased with it, rather on account of what it might be made than what it was, had at once taken it: whereupon, as already described, the handiwork of carpenters, masons, and bricklayers, had soon renovated the building from top to bottom. But why had it previously remained so long shut up ere the Count and Countess de Montville took it as their future abode? This is the point which I must now explain for the benefit of my reader. In a few words, then, it had borne the reputation of being haunted in consequence of a horrible crime committed on the person of the individual who had last occupied it. That occupant was a gentleman of eccentric habits, but of considerable wealth; and having neither wife nor children, he lived comparatively alone at the Willow House, keeping no man-servant, but only a couple of female domestics. This gentleman, about six years previous to the present date of my narrative, was murdered in a bye-lane half a mile distant from the mansion, as he was returning home, from a somewhat late ramble in the country. The same night—and, as it was supposed, immediately after the murder—the house itself was broken into and plundered of a large amount of property. The perpetrators of this double crime of assassination and robbery were discovered, tried, and executed; and by degrees the rumour spread about that the spirit of the late occupant of the Willow House was wont to walk at night through the various apartments. This report was firmly believed, amongst the poorer orders universally, and even by numbers of persons with whom one would scarcely have expected to find such gross superstition. Indeed, to such an extent did this belief prevail that no one could be found to live in the house to take care of it; and so it had remained shut up, gradually falling into decay until the time when the Count became its lessee. Whether the persons who had the letting of the place informed him of the reasons of its having been so long closed, I cannot say: at all events if they were thus candid on the point, it is very certain the report was disregarded by him, and did not prevent him from becoming the occupant of the mansion.

Now, as all the servants except myself had been engaged in London, they were not at first aware of the report which clung to the Willow House; and when, after the lapse of a week or two, they heard it from the town-gossips, they were little disposed to pay it any very great or serious attention. As for

myself, it had never for a single instant deterred me from applying for the place nor made me hesitate to accept it. I never was superstitiously inclined, and certainly should not have been so foolish as to have been swayed, where my interests were concerned, by what I could only regard as an old woman's tale.

One evening, after I had been six weeks in the Count's service, I went down into the kitchen to fetch some things that were wanted in the nursery; and I was immediately struck by beholding the domestics all huddled together as it were, and conversing with serious looks and in low half-hushed voices. As I made my appearance, the cook said to her companions, "Here is Mary, who is a native of Ashford, and can tell us all about it."

I drew near the group, scarcely suspecting what was the topic of their discourse, so little was I myself accustomed to think of it. When they therefore explained to me that they were talking of the prevalent belief of the house being haunted, I was much surprised to see the impression the report was now making on their minds, the more so as I was aware that they had previously heard it and had treated it lightly. I gave them such particulars as I was acquainted with relative to the circumstances of the murder; and when they asked me whether I myself put any faith in the tale that the spirit of the deceased gentleman haunted the premises, I did not exactly laugh, but I gave them to understand what degree of credit I attached to the story. It then became my turn to question; and I asked them wherefore they were now discussing the subject with every appearance of doubt and misgiving, if not positive alarm?

"You have not, then, heard any noise during the night since you have been here?" asked the butler.

I replied in the negative.

"Well," he continued, looking more grave and solemn if possible than before, "some of us *have*; and amongst them is myself. James has heard the noise too—Susan has heard it—and Septimus has heard it also."

Susan was the housemaid, and Septimus was his lordship's valet. He was a middle-aged man, quiet, sedate, and shrewd—the very last person in the world that I should have expected to give way to the influences of such a superstitious belief as this. He was not in the kitchen at the moment when this conversation had begun; but he entered just after the butler had ceased his remarks—and approaching us, he joined in with the discourse.

"Yes," he said, in a grave voice, "I must confess that I am bewildered, and even troubled by what I have heard for three or four nights past. But at first thinking it might only be fancy, I said nothing about it till this afternoon; and then, when I did mention it with the apprehension of being ridiculed, I was struck by finding that others had heard just the same noises and at precisely the same hour."

"But I remember reading in a book, when I was at Lady Harlesdon's," said I, "that there are often strange noises occurring in houses—especially those which have been shut up for a long time, or in which repairs have been recently made. For instance, the bursting of timbers, the settling down of woodwork or masonry, and similar causes may produce these sounds. The cracking of painted wainscotting, such as there is in the passage on the second floor, is another cause that may be mentioned. Why these sounds are seldom heard in the day-time, is because there is more or less bustling and activity going on in the house, and the attention is less liable to be arrested or startled by any such noise. But at night-time, when all is silent and the mind of any one lying awake is more keenly susceptible on these points, such sounds are calculated to attract the notice and even to startle the nerves."

"All this is reasonable enough, Mary," remarked Septimus, who as well as the other servants had listened with great attention to my observations; "but none of the causes you have mentioned will account for the audible and regular tread of footsteps upon the stairs and in the passage—much less for the low deep groans which have also met my ears."

"Have you indeed heard such sounds as these?" I asked, now becoming more profoundly interested in the topic, though still sceptical.

"I have," answered Septimus: "and so have several others here present."

"I for one," observed the butler.

"And me too, said James the footman.

"And me," added the cook. "Susan, who sleeps in the same room, has likewise heard them; and wasn't we both frightened? For my part, I shall give warning when my month is up, if it goes on."

"And so shall I indeed," added the housemaid.

"Do you not think it would be better," I asked, "to speak to his lordship and get a watch set? Depend upon it, the noises would be accounted for by some natural means."

"No—the Count is not a man to whom such things can be mentioned," observed Septimus: "he would only ridicule us all and perhaps scold. Although a good master, as we must all allow him to be, he is the first that I ever served who placed so little confidence in a valet as he does. I mean he never keeps me talking when I attend him in the dressing-room in the morning or at night. As soon as I have laid out the things he wants, he dismisses me. As for letting me help him with his toilet, he never does. But however, all that is little to the purpose now. What I mean to say is, that it won't do to mention anything of all we are talking about to his lordship."

"Then if you will permit me to offer my advice," said I, "I will tell you the course that ought to be adopted, before any of you resolve on ulterior steps, much less such a serious one as throwing up your places where you are happy and comfortable."

"What advice is it that you have to give, Mary?" asked several voices.

"I wonder that the project has not already struck you," said I. "Let two or three of you keep watch to-night; and if you hear those sounds, go boldly forth from the room, whichever it may be where you sit up, and ascertain for yourselves the cause of the disturbance."

"The hint's a good one," said the butler. "What say you, Septimus? Are you agreeable?"

"Quite," answered the valet.

"And me too," added James the footman. "Let's all three sit up in your room, Septimus. It's the nearest to the top of the stairs which the footsteps

have been heerd coming up fust of all. But mind," he added, turning to the butler, "you let us have a bottle of wine to keep up our spirits."

"Don't be afraid," was the response of the functionary thus appealed to: "we will have the wine. Well then, this is agreed upon; and as soon as the house is quiet, me and James will steal to your room, Septimus, and there we will keep watch. You have got pistols, hav'n't you?"

"Yes—but depend upon it we shan't have to use them. If it's anything at all, it's a ghost, and not a robber," continued the valet; "because robbers don't come sneaking into a house night after night for no purpose whatsoever—and nothing has been missed."

"Besides," added the butler, "there's no traces of any one having got in. However, we shall perhaps clear it up to-night. Only, if it is a spirit, I don't know that I shall overmuch like to encounter it."

"Will you have the kindness," said I, addressing myself to the valet, as the most sensible person of the lot, "to describe to me exactly what you have heard?"

"Willingly," was his answer. "I think it was four nights ago I was first disturbed in this way. I awoke, not gently and calmly as one usually wakes out of a sleep, but with a sort of suddenness as if something had startled me; and my first sensation was one of terror—I scarcely knew why. I sat up in bed and listened, but heard nothing. It was clear moonlight; so I took my watch and found it was close upon one o'clock. Scarcely had I put the watch under my pillow again, when I heard the sounds of footsteps ascending the stairs as plain as I can hear myself talking at this present moment. My first impulse was to jump up and raise an alarm of thieves in the house; but all in an instant the idea of the murdered gentleman rushed to my mind—and I was paralyzed, as one may say, with

terror. It seemed as if my hair all stood on end, and my blood turned to ice in my veins. The steps became gradually more and more distinct as they ascended; and I heard them pass close by the door of my room. At the same moment it struck me that I likewise heard the rustling of some one's clothes, as if brushing against the wall. When the noise had ceased by the footsteps retreating along the passage, I blamed myself for my folly in having been so frightened, and now thinking it must be some one moving about the house. Scarcely had I reasoned myself into this belief, when I heard the footsteps returning; and then, as sure as you are there, just as they were passing the door of my chamber, two low moans—*very* low, but still perfectly audible—reached my ears. Had it not been for those moans I should have jumped out of bed to see what was the matter, and whether anybody was ill, or if thieves had broken in: but I could not! An awful terror was upon me; and it was a long while before I could get to sleep again."

"All that you have described was just what I heard," said the butler, whose room was next to that of the valet.

"And I heard the steps the fust night and the moans the second," remarked James; "then both steps and moans for the two or three nights since."

The cook and housemaid corroborated the statement: the lady's-maid, the coachman, and the two or three other servants, who slept in a different part of the house, had heard nothing. Neither had I, as the reader already knows: but the nursery where I slept with the children, was in the same division of the premises as the rooms of the lady's-maid and the other domestics just alluded to.

"Well," continued Septimus, "on the second night I heard just the same thing all over again. On the third night I could not go to sleep till long after one o'clock; and before I was able to close my eyes I heard the same sounds repeated. Last night, on going to my chamber, I resolved to sit up, and happen what would, look out of my room should the same noises return; and I kept a candle a-light for the purpose. So I sat up till about half-past twelve; and then a cold shivering came all over me—an icy perspiration burst out upon my forehead—and my hair seemed to stand up at the roots. I did not mention all these particulars this afternoon, because I was rather ashamed to enter so deeply into them: but now that we are treating the matter very seriously, I don't mind explaining the whole truth. Well, in spite of my resolve to look out of the chamber and see what it was, I could not: for when I heard the footsteps gradually ascending the stairs again—then the unmistakable rustling of clothes—and then two or three deep and guttural groans, I was nailed to my chair with terror. The steps proceeded along the passage: and it appeared to me that they had just time to reach the end and then turn to retrace their way, when my ears caught them again. Again too did I hear the moans—again the brushing of the clothes against the wall of the passage—yes, and also against my door. Then, if my salvation had depended upon it, I could not possibly have moved from my seat! When I was able, all was silence once more; and cruelly bewildered, I flung off my clothes and got into bed. The light soon burnt down into its socket; and when the room was dark, I don't mind confessing that I really did fancy every moment I should either see some hideous ghastly face looking through the deep obscurity at me, or else feel a cold hand gradually place itself on me. It is horrible to have such sensations; and though all very well to ridicule them in the daytime, or be angry with yourself for having entertained them, yet what are you to do when in the middle of the night they will persist in fastening themselves upon you, and I defy you to throw them off?"

The circumstantial account which the valet thus gave, certainly staggered me somewhat—especially when I reflected that he was by no means a man to indulge in idle romance, and that his story was in every way corroborated by the evidence of several others.

"I suppose," he continued, after a brief pause, "that most of you here have read Lewis's story of the Bleeding Nun; and those who have, may recollect how every night at a certain hour, Don Raymond, as he lay ill in bed, heard the same awful footsteps approaching his door and beheld the same horrible apparition. Well, so far as the footsteps go, I can easily enter into the terrific sensations which Raymond—supposing there was ever such a character—must have experienced."

"And who knows," asked the butler, "but what we shall see the apparition next?"

I was unable to stay in the kitchen any longer to converse with my fellow-servants upon a topic which had gradually grown into one of rather more fearful interest than I chose to confess even to myself. The children were alone up in the nursery—they might awake, and missing me, would naturally cry. I therefore said "Good night," and hastened upstairs. By the time I had put the various things to rights it was half-past ten o'clock; and I now thought of seeking my couch. But all I had heard in the kitchen rapidly assumed a more solemn and even awful aspect, as I was about to commence my preparations for retiring to rest. I even began to feel afraid. I do not know that the word *afraid* is exactly the right one, because I certainly apprehended no harm either to myself or others—nor had I even yielded so far to superstitious belief as to imagine that the strange sounds would be traced to any save natural causes. Therefore, if not positively afraid, I at all events experienced a certain nervous agitation—an uneasiness and restlessness which were quite inconsistent with the hope of speedily wooing the presence of sleep. Besides, I knew that a watch was to be set that night, and I naturally felt some degree of curiosity as to the result.

"No," I suddenly said to myself, "it is useless for me to lie down: I know that I cannot sleep. At all events I will read for an hour."

So I took a book, sat down at the table again, and endeavoured to read. It was a "History of England," a book I was fond of studying; but I could not possibly settle my thoughts upon the pages which my fingers turned over. 'Tis true I read; but without profit. In the middle of a sentence I suddenly found my ideas travelling so completely away from the historical subject, that I at length gave up the attempt to read. But to what topic did my thoughts wander? To that which had

been discussed in the kitchen: nor could I divert my attention thence; and the nearer the hour approached when it seemed probable the mystery would be cleared up, the deeper and the more solemn grew the interest which I experienced in the result. But even this feeling could not keep off the sense of weariness that gradually grew upon me.

Midnight struck: the sharp chime of the clock in the passage thrilled through the passages, methought with a more than usual clearness in the deep silence of the hour. I started half up from my chair, and was aroused to the consciousness that for the few minutes previously a sort of dreamy repose had been stealing over me. The truth is, that yielding to exhaustion, I had nearly fallen asleep while reclining back in that chair, until thus thoroughly startled up and rendered wide awake again by the shrill metallic notes of the clock. A species of vague terror was now upon me: I felt cold, and experienced the sensation which is so well described as that of "the hair standing on end." The candle, with a very long wick, was burning so dimly that the room seemed full of shadows; and a deeper consternation seized upon me as I thought that phantom shapes were slowly moving about—dim, vague, and indistinct!

"This is foolish on my part," I exclaimed aloud, rising from my seat and making a strong effort to shake off as it were the terrors which had crept over me: then I snuffed the candle, and when it burned bright once more, I calmly and firmly threw my looks around the room—but beheld nothing to scare me. Having walked to and fro half-a-dozen times so as to regain perfect self-possession, I returned to my seat, and once more endeavoured to read. But in a few minutes I felt a renewed drowsiness coming over me, and my head drooping gradually towards the pages of the volume, the study of which I thus found it useless to pursue. I tried to rouse myself; but a feeling like a lethargy—or rather the gradual torpor of all feeling whatsoever—stole irresistibly upon me; and my head dropping upon the book, I fell asleep.

How long I had slept I knew not: but all in a single instant I was startled up into complete consciousness again. Good heaven, what a cry! The silence of the night was rent in twain by that loud yell of mingled terror and anguish, which ran from end to end of the Willow House. The frightened glance which I instinctively threw towards the bed in which the children lay, showed me that the two sleeping innocents had not been disturbed by it; and the next moment, without pausing to reflect upon the course I was pursuing, I rushed forth from the room. In my haste I had not taken the candle with me; but the passage communicating with the nursery, had a window at the end, and the moon was shining brightly. Two or three doors were thrown open in that passage at the same instant that I burst into it, and several voices inquired with intense alarm what was the matter. There was the lady's-maid at one door—the housekeeper at another—and I believe two or three more servants had likewise been startled from their slumbers in that same part of the building, and were demanding what had happened. But I was too much bewildered and terrified to notice who the particular individuals were that the cry had thus aroused; and despite my fears, I was impelled by an irresistible curiosity to ascertain the cause of the alarm. Speeding along the passage—then rushing down a flight of stairs—I gained that other passage whence the rooms of the valet, the butler, the footman, and some other dependants of the household, opened. Heavens! what a spectacle then met my view. The door of the valet's chamber stood wide open; and that individual, with a candle in his hand, and with the butler and footman close behind him, were transfixed upon the threshold. Leaning against the wall immediately facing them, was the Count de Montville, in his dressing-gown and slippers. His countenance was hideously pale—his eyes were rolling wildly—and he was gasping for breath, as if having just undergone some excruciating terror. The three men-servants were gazing upon their master in consternation and dismay—not having the power, even if they dared, to address a single syllable to him. The whole truth flashed to my mind in a moment: the Count was a somnambulist, and the three servants who had sat up to keep watch, had awakened him by suddenly emerging from the room with the light in their hands. Hence that fearful yell, which had burst from the lips of the startled sleep-walker.

Never shall I forget the expression of mingled horror and anguish which the Count de Montville's features displayed, while he leant against the wall, palpitating and gasping as if battling against death itself. All of a sudden, with a quick nervous motion, he put his right hand up to his left shoulder, and then drew the dressing-gown more tightly around him,—these motions being accomplished with such passionate vehemence that in themselves they were alarming. The next instant the Count sprang upon the valet—seized him by the collar—and exclaimed, "Wretch, what have you seen? Tell me, what have you seen? Speak, speak quickly! I am desperate! Speak, or I will throttle you!"

"My lord, my lord, forgive me," beseechingly cried the terrified Septimus. "I meant no harm—I saw nothing——"

"No—I am a fool!" suddenly muttered the Count: and all in a moment appearing to recover complete self-possession, he released the valet from his grasp and stepped a pace or two backward.

At this instant the Countess, rushing up the stairs, appeared upon the spot. She had hastily thrown on a white wrapper; and as her hair was all flowing in disorder over her shoulders, her countenance was ashy pale, and her looks full of consternation and terror, she seemed some spectral object thus coming to enhance the wild and strange effects of the scene.

"Good heavens, Victor! what has happened? what is the matter?" she cried, as she grasped her husband's arm and clung to him for support.

"Do not be alarmed, love," he answered, but in a singularly bewildered voice and manner, as if her presence there had suddenly deprived him of all his self-possession again.

"But that cry—that dreadful yell, which awoke me," she exclaimed, "what was it? I missed you from my side——"

"It is nothing—nothing," the Count rejoined with vehement quickness.

"But wherefore are the servants up—and dressed too?" instantaneously asked the Countess. "Something has happened—I *must* know!"

"The truth is, then," said the Count, speaking as if a cold shudder were upon him, and methought I could even hear his teeth chatter, "I am sometimes given to—to—to—walking in my sleep——"

"Oh! is that all?" exclaimed the Countess in a voice which showed she was ineffably relieved; and then she gazed up with a look of the most compassionate endearment into her husband's face.

"I hope, my lord," observed Septimus, who by this time had regained his own self-possession, "that your lordship will not be angry with me and the others here," glancing over his shoulder towards the butler and James, "for having startled your lordship in such a manner. But the truth is, for three or four nights running we heard strange footsteps in the house, and agreed to sit up and keep watch."

"I understand—yes—I understand—and I am not angry—I cannot be angry," said the Count: "you meant no harm! But at the same time," he added, "you should have told me what you heard and what you meant to do. You see that it is a weakness—a failing—an infirmity—I do not exactly know what to call it—on my part—and—and—my good fellows, you must feel with me that it is humiliating as well as disagreeable for me to be exposed thus before my servants."

Septimus muttered something more about being very sorry and so forth, in which expressions of regret the butler and James also joined; for they could not do otherwise than deeply feel the awkwardness of their own position. The Count then bade them "Good night," and hurried his lady away down stairs again to their chamber, which was on the floor below.

It appeared that my presence in the passage had not been observed by either the Count or Countess, in the confusion of the scene; for though I was near enough to observe all that took place, yet I was still far enough off, and likewise so much in the shade beyond the reach of the candle's rays, as to escape notice. I now retraced my way to the nursery, giving a few words of hurried explanation to the other servants who had been disturbed, and who having huddled on some clothing, were flocking to the spot just as I was returning from it. Indeed the whole scene which I have now described, did not last about four or five minutes, though taking up so much time in the description.

Tranquillity and silence once more prevailed throughout the mansion; and on regaining the nursery, I hastened to put off my apparel and seek my couch. But it was long ere sleep visited my eyes; for the effect which that dread instance of somnambulism had produced upon me, was even awful. The Count's face, when hideous and convulsed with the workings of mingled horror and anguish, haunted me in the darkness of my chamber, and seemed to be looking in upon me through the opening in the bed-curtains. Good heavens! what terrific feelings were expressed upon that countenance during the swift brief moments I had thus beheld it so awfully convulsed!—and I had observed, too, that while he was giving in broken sentences those explanations which told how he was a somnambulist, there was something so strangely bewildered in his tone, so dreary and despairing in his looks, so agonizing in the tremblings of his frame, that he must have been suffering with hideous and crucifying feelings at the time. When I did get to sleep, the entire spectacle was enacted over again in my dreams, but with added horrors; and more than once during the remainder of that dreadful night did I awake to find myself starting up in my bed, a prey to sensations of the most painful description.

I rose early with a head-ache, feverish, and unrefreshed by my broken slumbers, and felt so bewildered as I dressed the children that I committed a thousand errors in their toilet. In the midst of this occupation I heard the door open gently, and the Countess entered the nursery. She looked very pale and ill, the incident of the night having evidently produced a most painful effect upon her. She at once saw by my looks that I knew what had occured: but she did not ask me how. Perhaps she had really observed me in the passage at the time, but did not choose to say so: or perhaps she thought that I might already have received an account of the incident from one of the other servants.

"Were the children alarmed? did they hear it?" she inquired, speaking in a whisper aside to me, so that the little ones should not catch her words.

"No, my lady," I answered: "they both slept soundly."

"I am glad of that," she observed, her countenance brightening up. "It is a very painful thing; but of course his lordship is to be commiserated. He tells me that it is a habit with all the members of his family, and that if he ever be the least indisposed in health or commit the slightest excess with regard to wine, it is in this manner the effects show themselves. Ah! in future I will take care of him, now that I know it." The Countess paused for a few moments, and then said, "Mary, his lordship cannot of course notice the matter any more in the presence of his domestics. He does not for a moment blame those who sat up to watch, because he appreciates the goodness of their motives, after what Septimus stated at the time. Nevertheless, it is a sort of thing which one must wish not to be made the subject of gossipping; and knowing that you are a discreet as well as intelligent girl, I thought I would just step in now and give you a hint as to what I want done. In short, you must represent to your fellow-servants the propriety of keeping silent upon the unpleasant topic."

"I will candidly inform your ladyship," was my answer, "that I was in the kitchen last evening when the servants were speaking of the strange noises they had heard; and then it was resolved that some of them should keep watch: but I can assure your ladyship that it was from no feeling of impertinent curiosity,—indeed, without the remotest suspicion as to the real cause of those sounds—that Septimus, James, and the butler thus acted. Therefore your ladyship may rest assured that they will have no inclination to make the matter one of general conversation. At the same time, I will take the earliest opportunity of suggesting the prudence of reserve upon the point."

The Countess then quitted me; and after I had given the children their breakfast, I left them in charge of the housemaid for a few minutes while I descended to the kitchen. There, as naturally might be expected, I found all the servants talking upon the occurrence of the previous night; and I must say that I was much annoyed for my mistress's

sake on observing Mrs. Dunkley, the charwoman, listening with open mouth and upraised hands to all that was passing around her. It appeared that she had just "dropped in" to see the cook—most probably to ascertain why her services had been altogether dispensed with since the day of her exhibition respecting the gin, as mentioned in a previous chapter. But on so "dropping in," she had found the servants deep in the discussion of the occurrences which it was most desirable to keep from the ears of one who was sure to go retailing them throughout the town and neighbourhood. Despite my vexation at finding the woman there, I could not help for a moment being amused by her looks, as she greedily drank in with her ears everything that was said. There was something ludicrously mysterious and ridiculously solemn in the shakings of the head, the uplifting of the hands, and the half-hushed ejaculations of "Well, to be sure! deary me! lawk-a-daisy! well, I never!" and so forth, which marked the gloating avidity wherewith she devoured the narrative in all its details.

"Ah!" she said, at length delivering her opinion with a still more ominous look, and a still more solemn shake of the head on which the coal-scuttle bonnet was perched, "it's a awful thing to be a sleep-walker. There was poor Dunkley which used to get up early and go to bed late, and he never thought of trotting about in the middle of the night like that. He slept like a top! But then I suppose it was the beer as did it; for, poor dear man! he never went to bed sober during the twenty-two years and three months we was married. Alack! it was a extra pot of porter that knocked him off the hooks at last! Then there's me—I don't think that I'm given to sleep-walking. I can't say, but I never heerd that I was—leastways I never found myself knocking my nose agin the bed-post or the wall in the middle of the night. It's a awful thing, and makes one tremble all over just like no-how to think of. I s'pose the Count's troubled in his mind, poor man?"

"There are many persons who walk in their sleep, without being troubled in their mind," said I; "and I think, Mrs. Dunkley, that it will be as well if you do not mention outside of the house what you have just heard in it."

"Hey-day, young Miss!" exclaimed the charwoman, suddenly putting her arms akimbo and becoming quite red in the face with indignation: "what do you mean by dictating to me? I knowed you, Mary Price, when you was quite a little gal—a hinfant in your poor mother's harms—and I never thought the time would come when you would as much as charge me to my face with gossippin' and scandalizin'. Barring Mrs. Simmons, which takes in washing—and Mrs. Banks, which keeps the mangle—and Mrs. Slatterly, which has the sweetstuff shop—and Mrs. Dixon, which is the wife of the town-crier, I never gossips to nobody; but if any of them ladies does drop in just to take a cup of tea, I don't mean to say but what I shan't talk this matter over with 'em in a neighbourly way."

Septimus, who, as he afterwards told me, suspected that I had been spoken to by her ladyship relative to having the whole affair kept quite secret, now suddenly bethought himself of a manner of effectually sealing Mrs. Dunkley's lips: for he doubtless saw the impropriety of having allowed the discussion of the past night's adventures to proceed in her presence. He accordingly said, "I will bet you two bottles of gin, Mrs. Dunkley, that you can't keep the secret for an entire month, even if you tried?"

"And how do you know?" she snappishly demanded: then, without giving him time to answer, she added, "But I can though; and what's more I will, if so be you give me half the wager now, and the other half when I have won it——for win it I shall and can, if I like."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Septimus: and he whispered a few words to the butler, who at once proceeded to the cellar, and in a few minutes returned with a bottle of Hollands, the first glimpse of which made Mrs. Dunkley's mouth water and her countenance brighten up to an extraordinary degree.

"Well," she said, instantaneously displaying the best possible humour, "I do like people which is honourable in their wagers, and I'm sure for my part I wouldn't be the cause of no unpleasantness whatsomever. As for you, Mary Price," she continued, turning to me, "when I pretended to flare-up just now agin you, it was on'y in fun and just to see what you would say: so there's no ill will betwixt us. And now, Mr. Septimus, if I don't see you afore, I shall come back at the end of the month for t'other bottle."

With these words Mrs. Dunkley concealed the bottle just brought in, under her old rusty black shawl; and bidding us all "Good morning," she marched off with her prize in a sort of triumph, her pattens (which she invariably wore on all occasions, even to church on Sunday) clattering as she took her departure.

For some days afterwards the servants at the Willow House continued to discuss amongst themselves the strange incident of that memorable night which made the Count's habit of somnambulism known to us: but by degrees the topic lost its interest, as all such things do—and at the end of a fortnight it was scarcely mentioned any more. At first I had noticed that the Count himself seemed pale, taciturn, and even care-worn, as if the occurrence weighed upon his mind: but in the midst of renewed gaieties, parties, and festivities, he also soon appeared to banish the incident from his memory.

CHAPTER LIV.

WALKS IN THE GARDEN.

It was in the middle of October—wanting now but a fortnight to the day on which I was either to see Eustace Quentin or receive a letter from him—when the incident I am about to relate took place. One morning after breakfast the Count and Countess were walking together in the garden; and as was often the case, they had the children with them, I being in attendance at the same time. It was a beautiful day, but chill—and her ladyship having nothing over her shoulders, desired me to return into the house and fetch her a shawl. I hastened to obey her command; and on issuing forth into the garden again, sped after my master and mistress, who with the two children were sauntering slowly along the gravel-walk towards the extremity of the

grounds. The moment I came within earshot, I heard her ladyship saying, "But, my dear Victor, you really must write to your lawyers in Paris to make more haste in settling the business; for our account will soon be inconveniently low at the banker's——"

"Well, my love, my dear angel," responded the Count, "if I do not receive letters to-morrow, I will either write very peremptorily or go myself——"

"Your ladyship's shawl," said I: and I was startled by the suddenness with which the Count turned round upon me.

Heaven knows I had not the slightest intention of listening with undue curiosity to the discourse of my master and mistress: I could not help overhearing what I did; nor should I have attached the slightest importance to it—for the remarks thus made had nothing very extraordinary in them—had it not been for the sort of consternation which appeared to seize upon the Count on finding that I was at the moment close behind. Her ladyship did not perceive either the extreme suddenness of her husband's movement, nor the singular and dismayed look which he fixed upon me: for she was walking the least thing in advance of him at the time, and then on hearing me speak, she calmly stood still while I threw the shawl over her shoulders. The deduction I could not help making in my own mind, was that while her ladyship did not seem to attach any undue importance to the circumstance of my being so close at the moment, her husband was on the other hand startled and dismayed thereby. He however said nothing, but turning round again, resumed his walk with her ladyship—while I hastened after the children, who were getting into some little mischief in another part of the garden.

The occurrence I have just mentioned made a considerable impression upon my mind. That a husband and wife should talk of their affairs—that they should casually notice to each other the state of their finances at their banker's, and the necessity of replenishing them from their legitimate sources elsewhere—was all natural enough; and as I ere now said, I should not have attached the slightest importance to the few words that had caught my ear, had not the Count himself behaved so singularly. A certain feeling of uneasiness rose up in my mind—a sort of vague suspicion which I could not exactly define, and which I endeavoured to banish as much as possible: but still I could not help thinking of the circumstance for the whole of that day. It seemed as if my confidence in certain respects had been shaken, and that I began to mistrust where I had never thought of mistrusting before. In plainer terms still, the suspicion which floated so mistily and hazily in my brain, was nevertheless sufficiently definite and palpable as to make me hope for my mistress's sake that it would prove altogether unfounded.

I have frequently noticed that whenever an unpleasant doubt concerning anything or anybody has been created by one incident, another is pretty sure to follow close upon its heels to strengthen it. So was it in the present case. The very next morning, as the Count and Countess were again walking in the garden, with the children playing about, and myself in attendance in order to look after them, James made his appearance with the letters which the postman had just brought. Having delivered some to the Count and Countess, he gave one to me bearing the post-mark of Paris. Although I longed to read it—for I fancied that the handwriting of the address was that of Jemima, Lady Harlesdon's maid—yet I was compelled to restrain my curiosity until alone, it of course being contrary to good manners for a servant to open a letter when in attendance upon her master and mistress.

"Have you any letters from Paris, dear Victor?" I heard her ladyship ask of the Count.

"What, my love—letters from Paris, my angel? No—I think not," he replied; and methought he glanced with a quick look of uneasiness round towards me, as if fearful that I might overhear something which he would rather I should not catch.

"But this is very provoking, dear Victor," said the Countess. "Here is a letter from my uncle, stating that he cannot comply with my request—— But what letter is that you have there?" asked the Countess, as she suddenly raised her eyes, and by her manner seemed to be struck with something peculiar in her husband's look. At least such was my conjecture; for of course I could not see his countenance, as I was walking behind with the children.

"Oh! nothing, nothing, my love—nothing, my angel, I can assure you," rejoined the Count, as he thrust the letter he had just been reading into his pocket.

"Nay—but you looked annoyed," said her ladyship in an affectionately urgent tone.

"Oh! no, my sweet—not at all, my beauty—quite the reverse:"—and the Count laughed; but it struck me there was something hollow in his mirth. "It is merely a letter from—from—an old friend of mine——nothing more."

The Countess did not utter another word, but walked on slowly, resuming the perusal of her own letter which she held in her hand. This silence between my master and mistress lasted for four or five minutes; and I could not help thinking that it had something awkward and embarrassing in it. I was likewise struck by his lordship's manner: for his very gait denoted uneasiness—he also looked two or three times round towards me, and then gave a sidelong glance at his wife—but he said nothing. The suspicion already awakened in my mind by the incident of the previous day, had rendered me very keenly alive to all the little circumstances of the present occasion; and by what I thus observed my feeling of uneasiness was strengthened—my suspicion became more definite and clear—in short, I fancied that everything was not right with the Count.

Suddenly her ladyship turned round and said, "Mary, I think I saw James give you a letter. You are welcome to read it if you please; or you can retire to another part of the garden to do so."

I was glad of an opportunity of getting to a distance from my master and mistress at this moment; for to a certain degree I felt the awkwardness of being a witness of that sudden coolness which had evidently sprung up between them. So taking the children away with me, I struck into another gravel-walk, and opened my letter. Its contents were not very long; and at once glancing to the bottom, I saw the name of her from whom I expected it had come. This was what Jemima said:—

"Paris, October 13, 1829.

"My dear Mary,

"Your letter reached me at Florence, and I gave her ladyship the one it contained for her. I do not know what you could have said in it, but it made her ladyship cry; and she said that she had wronged you, that you were a good girl, and it was a great source of consolation to her to have heard from you. It was his lordship's intention to winter in Italy; but some very important business has suddenly transpired to make him alter his mind; and so we are all on our way back to England. I should have written to you from Florence, and so would Lady Harlesdon; only her ladyship thought it better to wait till we arrived here [Paris] so that an appointment might be made for you to see her ladyship on our return to England. As his lordship lays down each day's travelling with his usual precision in all such things, her ladyship is able to calculate that we shall pass through Canterbury on the 17th; and she hopes that if you can possibly manage it, you will be at the *Fountain Hotel* during two or three hours in the middle of that day—when, happen what will, she is resolved to see you. I say *happen what will*, because his lordship does not let her have her own way quite so much as he used to do. I also, dear Mary, long to embrace you; and so I do hope you will be there. I have such a budget of news to tell you—particularly how I was nearly marrying a Prince, but who was not a Prince after all—only a swindler. If he had been a Prince and I had married him, would not the Gipsy Queen's prophecy have been fulfilled? You know what I allude to: I mean when she told me my fortune in Hyde Park. But however, you must not think me foolish enough to put any faith in that now. When Princes turn out swindlers, who can believe in Gipsy Queens?

"Now, dear Mary, if this does not find you at Ashford (though when you wrote you said you would be there for some months to come) and if you do not get it in time to be at Canterbury on the 17th, then when you *do* get it you must write to me at Harlesdon House in London. But again I say that I shall hope to see you at Canterbury. And now no more from

"Your affectionate friend

"JEMIMA WILKINSON.

"To Miss Mary Price,
"Ashford, Kent."

How delighted I was at receiving this letter, the reader can full well imagine. That Lady Harlesdon had been completely disabused of all her prejudices concerning me, was quite evident; and it was one of the happiest moments of my life to reflect that my character was thus altogether cleared up with one whom, notwithstanding all her faults and frailties, I sincerely loved. The 17th was the following day; I must therefore ask the requisite leave of absence in order to meet her ladyship and Jemima at Canterbury. I was retracing my way along the gravel-walk with the children towards that in which I had left the Count and Countess, when I observed her ladyship advancing alone towards the mansion. I hurried on to accost her, and was struck by perceiving that she was in tears. The children ran up to their mother: and hastily wiping her eyes, she stooped down to kiss them, thus fondling and playing with them for a minute or two evidently to veil her affliction from me. I turned aside, and looked another way while she was thus engaged; and then I observed the Count just entering the house, he having left his wife behind him in the garden, so that I feared a quarrel had taken place between them.

"Well, Mary," said her ladyship, "have you had good news from any quarter? for I observed that you seemed particularly happy as you approached me."

"My late mistress Lady Harlesdon will be at Canterbury to-morrow," I answered; "and she wishes to see me. I therefore thought of soliciting your ladyship's leave for a day's absence."

"This is rather awkward—for his lordship sets off on a journey within an hour. Indeed, he is going to France on particular business, and will be absent for ten days or a fortnight."

"I should be sorry to put your ladyship to the slightest inconvenience, and will therefore write to Lady Harlesdon to acquaint her with the impossibility of paying my respects to her to-morrow."

"No: I should not like you to be thus disappointed," said the Countess. "You shall go, Mary."

I thanked her ladyship for her kindness; and she then passed on into the mansion. I remained a little longer with the children in the garden; and when I took them in-doors I found that preparations were making for his lordship's departure. The carriage was being got in readiness; and a portmanteau had been packed and brought down into the hall. As I was taking the children upstairs, her ladyship came forth from the drawing-room, and said, "Let them come in for his lordship to bid them good bye. You can remain here for a minute or two while they accompany me."

I accordingly stopped upon the landing; and the Countess passed into the drawing-room with her children. She left the door ajar, inadvertently I presume; and I heard her say, "Forgive me, my dear Victor, if I have been too urgent relative to your affairs——"

"Well, I forgive you," exclaimed the Count: "but you should not have pressed me so about that letter——"

"Pardon me—but I was so fearful of something wrong," interrupted the Countess, in a voice full of affectionate entreaty.

I could not help hearing the few sentences of their conversation which I have just recorded, because they reached my ears even as I retreated to the extremity of the landing; and finding that the discourse of the Count and Countess would still penetrate to me thither, I ascended the next flight of stairs so as to escape the necessity of being a listener. From the little I had heard, however, it was clear, as I had previously surmised, that the Count and Countess had been quarrelling on two distinct subjects—namely, his lordship's money-affairs, and that letter which he had so hastily crumpled up and thrust into his pocket.

In a few minutes her ladyship came forth from the drawing-room; and not immediately perceiving me, called me by name. I hastened down, and again took charge of the children. Shortly afterwards—indeed within a quarter of an hour—the Count took his departure in the carriage, which, as I presently learnt, was merely to convey him to Canterbury, where he purposed to take the stage-coach to Dover, and thence embark on the following morning for Calais. In the course of the afternoon the Countess came up into the nursery and sat for an hour or two with the children. She was evidently unhappy—not merely in consequence of her husband's departure, but with a certain restlessness and uneasiness which she could not altogether conceal. It likewise struck me that more than once she embraced her children with

a kind of passionate effusion, as if it afforded relief to her troubled mind—or even as if she had some misgiving relative to the future destiny of these innocent little beings whom she thus so warmly strained to her bosom. I felt much on her account: for notwithstanding the aristocratic airs she was accustomed to give herself, the silly pride she displayed, and the overweening vanity with which she bore her rank of Countess, she had many good points in her character and had been all along kind to me. Her disposition was decidedly most affectionate: there could be no doubt that she passionately loved her husband, and was equally devoted to her children.

Early on the following morning I repaired into the town—took a place in the van to Canterbury—and at mid-day entered the cathedral city. On proceeding to the *Fountain Hotel* I immediately recognized Lord Harlesdon's three travelling-carriages in the courtyard; and a hostler, to whom I addressed myself, informed me that the family had arrived about an hour previously. While I was still speaking to this individual, I heard my name called by a well-known voice; and hastily looking back, beheld Jemima flying towards me. Although several persons were lounging about in the hotel-yard, she threw her arms round my neck and embraced me with the warmest affection.

"Dear me, Mary, how you have grown!" she cried, when she had time to speak. "To be sure, I have not seen you since last Christmas—and ten months make an immense difference. And how well you look, too!—so handsome and quite like a lady! Ah, her ladyship will be so glad to see you; and fortunately my lord has gone to take a stroll and see the cathedral while lunch is being got ready. So come along at once. Oh! what a deal you have passed through since last you and I met! That affair at Derby about the Percivals made quite a heroine of you. I really envied you, Mary: it was so romantic! I do hope that some day or another you will print all these things in a book: I am certain it would have an immense sale. But here we are."

While thus rattling away with exceeding volubility, the good-tempered Jemima had hurried me on into the hotel; and now we paused at a door at which she knocked. A voice from within feebly bade her enter; and throwing open the door, Jemima exclaimed, "Here she is, my lady!"

I passed on into a handsomely furnished apartment, where I found myself in the presence of Lady Harlesdon, who was seated there with her children.

Her ladyship took me in her arms and kissed me. I felt her hot tears upon my cheeks; and I full well conjectured that they were called forth by the poignantly revived reminiscences of many, many things which she knew were not strange to me. I wept also as I murmured, "O dear lady! how happy I am thus to be restored to your confidence and good opinion!"

"Mary," answered her ladyship, in a tremulous voice, "I am sorry that I ever doubted you. But we will speak of this anon. Here are some little people whom you know well."

She alluded to the children, whom I embraced tenderly one after the other. Master Alexander Adolphus was now in his sixth year, and was a fine little fellow. Albert Henry, who was four and upwards, was likewise much grown and improved; while Isabella Clementina, now two years and a half, was a child of exquisite loveliness. The two boys knew me at once and were delighted to see me. As I embraced them one after the other, they threw their little arms round my neck and clung to me as if I had been a near relation. Isabella was too young at the time I left Harlesdon Park to have a perfect recollection of me now: but when I took her up in my arms she was very far from regarding me as a stranger, and instinctively as it were brightened up with smiles as I covered her beautiful cheeks with kisses. After I had caressed and played with the children for a few minutes her ladyship bade Jemima take them away, as she wished to be alone with me for a short time.

I must here pause for a moment to observe that Lady Harlesdon was sadly altered. She was thin, even to emaciation; her complexion, always transparently fair, was now so very, very pale that it looked like the stainless marble, and it seemed as if the slightest touch would soil its whiteness. Through the diaphanous skin of the forehead the delicate tracery of blue veins might be seen running like tendrils; and on her shadowy hands the veins also might be observed, branching like the fibres of a leaf, but faintly pencilled. A slight flush of beautiful vermilion, more like the tint of art than of nature, had risen to her cheeks in the excitement of the first moments of our meeting; but it had now faded away, leaving her countenance apparently paler by the contrast than it was before. Her azure eyes were full of a soft and drooping melancholy, like those which the old masters have given to their pictures of a youthful Magdalen: and yet not even the pencil of Guido could have painted the touching and interesting beauty of Lady Harlesdon as I now beheld it. Alas, poor creature! even if I had not known that she had suffered much, I should have read her unhappy fate upon her countenance as well as in the wasting away of her form.

"You regard me with a melancholy attention," said her ladyship, again taking my hand and pressing it kindly. "Alas! it is no wonder—for you doubtless find me much altered? Let me reflect," she continued, with the soft plaintiveness of a voice that had grown enfeebled in proportion as her form itself was fading: "it is ten months since you last saw me, and during that time I have suffered deeply, deeply—yes, more than I can tell:"—and she compressed her tremulous lips as if to keep back the gush of those feelings that had risen up to her very throat.

"Dear lady," I said, "we all have our misfortunes in this world."

"True!" she exclaimed, in sudden accents of hysterical bitterness: "but then there are degrees in human unhappiness, and those which fall to my lot are the extreme! Nevertheless, Mary," she added in a milder and gentler tone, "you who know my history well, cannot altogether sympathise with me; for you are virtuous and good, whereas I am criminal and frail."

"Oh, dear lady! I do sympathise with you—and most sincerely too," I exclaimed, pressing her thin white hands to my lips. "I am fearful that the narrative I sent to your ladyship at Florence may have plunged a dagger into your already too deeply wounded heart: but what was I to do? It was

imperative that I should clear up my own character in your eyes; and in order to effect this, I was compelled to explain everything."

"I know it, I know it, Mary—and not for worlds could I reproach you on that account! Besides, I never ought to have mistrusted you—I never ought to have given my blind belief to appearances. But yet, when those appearances were so startling—when I beheld you as I thought in the arms of him on whom the affections of my youth had been bestowed—Oh! you can scarcely wonder if, inspired by the demon of jealousy, I not only believed that you were false and hypocritical, but I likewise became inveterate against you. Ah! Mary, although you are aware I have loved that man, you know not how fond, how deep was my affection. And now, when still so young in the world, I am old in bitter experiences, and I have lived long enough to learn that love can teach many lessons to a woman, but that its last and worst is to prove that it is not eternal, and that it can depart, but only to leave a scar behind never to be effaced, and a void never to be filled up!"

The tears were streaming down her cheeks as she thus spoke; and I was weeping also. She had uttered those last words not so much with the bitterness of disappointment as with the mournfulness of contrition; and it seemed as if she felt that her punishment was a just retribution for her frailties.

"No," she continued, suddenly taking up the thread of a former part of her discourse, "I do not for an instant blame you for having given me a full explanation of all the detestable treacheries and vile perfidies which were practised for the double purpose of plunging fresh daggers into my heart and inducing you to listen to the voice of the seducer. Thank heaven, my dear girl, that by the aid of your indomitable virtue you have escaped. For God's sake never turn aside from this path of strictest rectitude which you have hitherto pursued. I, who

have done so, and who have received such bitter experiences of the consequences, may be permitted to give you this advice. And yet you scarcely need it—and there is even something that savours of insult in proffering such counsel to you who are so good, so virtuous!"

Lady Harlesdon paused, and for a few minutes sank into a deep reverie, during which I continued to gaze upon her with feelings painfully moved: for I could not help thinking that before me sat a being on whom nature, and rank, and fortune had shed all their choicest gifts, but whose happiness had been marred by her own heart's affections. Yes—in her case, as in the case of so many bright and beautiful beings in this world, the holy dew of love which should fall with gentle freshness upon the heart and prove a delicious moisture to quicken the growth of all its tenderest and finest feelings, had been changed into a poison to corrode the exquisite fibres of that heart, blight its flowers, and wither all its delicate tendrils.

"The causes of my unhappiness are well known to you, Mary," resumed her ladyship at length. "Not only am I compelled to harbour the painful and undying conviction that all my love has been centred upon an unworthy object; but I am likewise forced to endure the unceasing persecutions of a husband who hates me, and who not daring to assassinate me outright, is murdering me by inches. Alas! I cannot find words to describe the myriads of petty tyrannies which Lord Harlesdon makes me endure. You have seen a specimen of his capacity for fiendish mischief and malignity in this respect. Yet I deserve it all! I know that I injured him—that I have deceived him: and yet the punishment is cruel indeed——too cruel! too cruel!" added her ladyship, shaking her head with the mournfulness of utter despair, and with a slight convulsive wringing of the hands.

"But if the punishment itself be disproportionate to the offence," I ventured to observe, "surely, dear lady, it must soon cease?"

"Yes, Mary—it will soon cease," rejoined Lady Harlesdon, in a voice ominously plaintive: "but only when I am laid cold in the grave—and then what will become of my poor children? It is true that I do not fear they will be left to want, because that same pride which has prevented his lordship from discarding me will also serve to prevent him from repudiating them. But, O God! if he should perpetuate towards those innocents the remorseless malignity which he has shown towards their mother, better far were it that I should strangle them in their sleep than leave them at the mercy of him who is but their father in name! And if I have hitherto endured all the horrors, the anguish, and the excruciations of my position, it has been only for their sake. Yet heaven knows my patience has frequently been goaded to that degree at which it seemed that no farther tension of the feelings was possible, and that the bow must snap. I mean that I have been driven to desperation—and it is a wonder that at those times of ineffable agony I have not either taken my children and fled away with them—or else laid violent hands upon them first and myself afterwards——or else," she added in a voice that suddenly became deep and gloomy, "turn round upon my persecutor and with a blow avenge all that I conceived to be my wrongs."

I was horror-stricken at these last words; and Lady Harlesdon observed the look of consternation and dismay which rose up on my countenance.

"No, my dear girl," she immediately continued, "you need not entertain any apprehensions of that kind. It is scarcely possible that I could so far forget myself as to do my husband an injury. I have already suffered too much not to be able to suffer on to the end; and this I shall do for the sake of those poor children. Nevertheless, Mary, my life is an incessant pandemonium: it is the realization upon earth of those tortures which we are led to suppose await the wicked hereafter. God forbid that you, my poor girl, should ever by your own experience be able to appreciate one tithe of the sufferings of which I am speaking!"

Lady Harlesdon covered her face with her hands, and by the half-subdued sobs which met my ears, by the convulsive movements of her frame, and by the tears which trickled through her fingers, it was alas! too easy to conjecture the harrowed state of her feelings. I threw myself upon my knees before her, beseeching her to tranquillize herself; but for some minutes she did not seem to hear my words, nor even to be aware of my presence. At last she slowly moved her hands from her countenance; and wiping her eyes bent down and kissed me affectionately. Then she bade me rise and resume my seat.

"Yes—for ten months, since you last saw me, Mary," she continued, giving utterance to the painful ideas which were uppermost in her mind, "I have never known a moment's happiness—scarcely a moment's tranquillity. Throughout the day—every day, I mean—his lordship is almost constantly with me; he seems to have devoted the remainder of his life to the dreadful purpose of abridging mine. Never was a revenge so terrible! There is not a circumstance, even the most trivial, which transpires around us, but with a horrible ingenuity he makes it subservient to his vindictive purposes. The bitterest taunts and the most lancinating sarcasms are continually dropping from his lips when we are alone together: and in the presence of others his words, though more guarded, are still permeated with a covert vein of irony, equally poignant. Even when, before visitors or the servants, he appears to be addressing me in terms of ordinary courtesy, all his syllables are daggers—and I feel them plunging into my heart. You may think that in time I should grow accustomed to this conduct on his part: but mine is not a temperament that can thus nerve itself with a stern cold philosophy. I am keenly sensitive, and he knows it—Oh! he knows it—and it is upon these susceptible chords of my heart, that he thus incessantly plays with so demon-like a malice. You said just now that he must cease in time. Perhaps you thought that he would grow wearied of this systematic persecution? No, no—I tell you that he has devoted his life to it; it has become as it were a part of his being; and all I can do is to go on enduring and suffering—thus enduring and suffering until the end! Mary," continued Lady Harlesdon, "I should look forward with hope and joy to the tranquil slumber of the cold tomb, were it not for those three innocents whom I must leave behind me. It is that thought which distracts me—which drives me mad! I have relations both wealthy and kind, who, if I were to throw myself into their arms

and reveal everything, would gladly take charge of my beloved children: but can you not understand how the mind revolts against the bare idea of making such confession and having to acknowledge that all the persecutions I endure have been justly brought upon myself? Besides, were I to take such a step, it would be as it were proclaiming to the world my frailty, and society would visit upon my poor children their mother's crime."

Lady Harlesdon ceased, and again fell into a deep and mournful reverie. I remained silent—for the matter was alike too painful and delicate for me to offer any comments.

"My poor girl," she resumed at the expiration of a minute or two, "I have been wrong to dwell at this length upon my own afflictions. I wished to see you, not merely to say how completely you have restored yourself to my confidence by the letter of explanation you sent through Jemima, but likewise to hear how you are getting on and ascertain whether I can do anything for you."

At this moment the door opened abruptly, and Jemima thrust in her head, saying, "His lordship is just crossing the courtyard!"

"Then you must leave me, Mary—you must leave me," said her ladyship, starting up from her seat. "Write to me in London, and I will answer your letters. Now go with Jemima, and you will take some lunch with her and the children. Farewell for the present, my dear girl."

With these words Lady Harlesdon embraced me hurriedly but affectionately; and I followed Jemima away to another room.

CHAPTER LV.

THE HISTORY OF A PRINCE.

When we had partaken of some refreshments, and the three children were playing together very peaceably and quietly, Jemima and I began to talk upon past events. She was rather curious to know what had taken place between me and Lady Harlesdon, and also the precise nature of the letter which I had sent through her to her ladyship when they were in Florence: but without entering into minute particulars, I gave Jemima to understand that the letter had contained such explanations as were requisite to clear up whatsoever had seemed suspicious in the circumstances of my sudden disappearance from Harlesdon Park. I then asked Jemima what she meant by stating in her letter that she had very nearly married a Prince who turned out to be no Prince after all?

"Ah, the villain!" she exclaimed, her countenance suddenly flushing with indignation: "he not only made a fool of me, my dear Mary, but also robbed me of all my savings into the bargain."

"And how much did you thus lose?" I asked.

"Seventy-six pounds, in good English sovereigns," returned Jemima. "But after all it was not so much the loss of the money that annoyed me, as to think what a fool I was made of. Oh, it is so vexing!"

"Pray give me the particulars," said I.

"I will. But you did not say anything to her ladyship about that part of my letter, did you?"

"Certainly not: I should scarcely have thought of such a thing, not knowing whether she was acquainted with the subject."

"Oh! no—I took very good care," exclaimed Jemima, "to keep the thing very quiet, not only from her ladyship, but also from the other servants, as I did not want to be laughed at. Indeed, I should not have mentioned it to you, only you are different from all the rest and would not turn me into ridicule. Besides, I have always felt a sisterly kind of regard for you, dear Mary; and that is the reason why I cannot help telling you my adventure. But as we have not much time—for the carriages are ordered to be in readiness at three o'clock—I will go on with my story at once."

Accordingly, having glanced round to satisfy herself that the children were not getting into any mischief, Jemima proceeded as follows:—

"You know it was just about the middle of January, immediately after the trial at Derby, where you behaved so nobly, that we set off for the Continent. I do not mean to delay you now with any minute particulars of our journey: all those points shall be for when we meet again and have more time to converse. Suppose us, then, arrived in Florence in the early part of February,—and there we put up at a splendid hotel, while his lordship looked about for a suitable villa to hire in the Vale of Arno. The very morning after we arrived at the hotel I met upon the stairs such a fine, tall, dashing-looking gentleman, with such a military look, such splendid eyes, and such a lovely moustache. Now, I must frankly confess, Mary, that I am passionately fond of moustachios; and I hope that whenever I *do* marry it will be somebody with as fine a pair as those that graced the lip of the person I am speaking of. Well, I had the children with me, and was going to take them for a walk in the garden belonging to the hotel; and so the moustached gentleman stopped to caress the children, declaring that he never saw such sweet little dears in all his life. He spoke English beautifully, but with just enough accent to leave it doubtful whether he was an Irishman or a foreigner. I however made up my mind that he was the latter; and so it afterwards appeared. As for little Bella, whom I had in my arms at the time, he was quite delighted with her: but while he patted her cheeks I could not help thinking that he looked very tenderly at me. Now you know, Mary, that I never gave any improper encouragement to the other sex; but on this occasion—I don't know how it was—I must confess I felt flattered by the stranger's attention. He asked me whose children they were; and when I told him, he put a great many questions to me about Lord and Lady Harlesdon—when they had arrived, how long they meant to stay, and so forth? But it was not as if he were impertinently inquisitive: it seemed as though the little children had inspired him with a sort of interest that made him ask these questions. So I answered him very civilly; and when I got down into the garden, I could not help wondering who he was and whether he lived in the hotel. In the course of the day I again met him on the stairs; and he gave me so kind a nod, with nothing impudent in it, but just for all the world as if we were old acquaintances. The next morning, as I was taking the children out again, he was standing in the gateway of the hotel; and a

groom in a rich livery was speaking to him. They were talking in English: for the groom, as I afterwards discovered, was an Englishman. Just as I was passing, looking from the corner of my eyes to see whether he would notice me and the children again, I heard the groom say, 'Yes, your Highness.' —I really thought I should have dropped: it gave me such a turn to think that I should have been so familiarly spoken and nodded to by a Highness! For of course I knew very well that that could only be the title of a Prince. Well, I was sneaking by, and not daring to look up at him any more, when he turned round upon me, speaking so condescendingly, and declaring that he must have a moment's chat with his little friends—meaning the two boys. The groom touched his hat and went away; and the Prince, putting his hand into his pocket, pulled out a lot of beautiful sweetmeats, which he gave the children. How he came to have them about him at the time, I could not conceive: but I have since thought that from the very first he had meant to play his tricks with me, and also make friends with the children as a means of getting acquainted with the parents. Well, he stopped and chatted very kindly with me—and don't think me vain, Mary, if I tell you that he paid me such pretty compliments I really thought him the most delightful man I ever met in all my life."

Here Jemima paused and heaved a profound sigh, evidently in regret that her brilliant hopes should have experienced such sad disappointment.

"Well," she continued, "the idea of this handsome Prince kept running in my head for all the rest of that day; and next morning, when I took the children out again, I felt my heart all in a flutter, wondering whether I should meet him. But conceive my surprise when, on traversing the courtyard of the hotel, I beheld him in conversation with Lord Harlesdon. The groom in the elegant livery was standing by, holding such a beautiful horse, which was tossing its fine head about as if impatient to be mounted by its master. 'Ah! my lord,' said the Prince, 'here are those sweet little children of your's:' and he instantly came up to caress them, flinging a very tender look upon me at the same time. I thought that Lord Harlesdon gave a brief abrupt ejaculation, very much resembling a grunt, as if he liked as little as could be that allusion to his children."

Here I should observe that Jemima was speaking all along in a low and confidential voice, which invariably sank into a whisper at those parts of her narrative which she thought it better should not catch the ears of Master Alexander Adolphus, who was a very quick and intelligent boy.

"Having stopped to speak to the children in the way I have described," continued Jemima, "the Prince put his hand into his pocket and again drew forth a quantity of sweetmeats, which he distributed amongst them. Then, as Lord Harlesdon for politeness' sake was compelled to mutter a few words of thanks for his Highness's attention to the children, the Prince exclaimed, 'Oh, I am so fond of such little innocents as these!'—and then he went on to tell his lordship how, when he was Ambassador from the Court of France to some German Sovereign (I forget now whom he said) he was the greatest favourite in the world with the little princes and princesses who were the children of that monarch. I passed on my way into the garden with my little charges; and the image of the Prince was never out of my thoughts. I certainly was vain enough to fancy that I had captivated him; and you may be sure, my dear Mary, that I did not forget the prediction of the Gipsy Queen. 'Well,' I thought to myself, 'although she was very wicked in stealing the child, yet after all who knows but that she might have been right enough in prophesying that I should marry a Prince? Besides, did she not say that the Prince whom I was thus to marry would be young and handsome, tall and dark, and dressing with great elegance? Well, this Prince is not much above thirty, and may therefore be called young; and he is certainly very handsome, as well as tall and dark. As for his dress, nothing can be more elegant; and perhaps I shall yet see a star upon his breast.'—Then I remembered what the old Norwood Gipsy had said in addition to her daughter's prophecy at the time in Hyde Park, that *three* Princes would present themselves within the year at the mansion of my noble master and mistress, and that I was to marry the third. Now instead of this being the mansion, it was an hotel in Florence; and as for waiting for the *third* Prince, I thought I should be but too glad to accept the offer of this *first one*, if he were to propose to make me his wife. I dare say you think me very weak-minded and foolish, Mary, for having given way to such reflections; and so no doubt I was—but depend upon it I shall never do so again."

"I sincerely hope not, Jemima," I remarked: yet scarcely had the words escaped my lips, when I recollected the singular instance of the Gipsy Queen's apparent skill in palmistry with regard to myself at the house in St. Giles's.

"In the evening," continued Jemima, "I learnt from one of the hotel servants that the Prince de Chantilly was dining with my lord and her ladyship: so I inquired who this Prince was, of course very well knowing that it was the one who was constantly running in my head. I was now informed that his Highness was a French Prince—that he was reputed to be immensely rich—that he was unmarried, had filled some high posts in the service of the French King, and had been staying in Florence for about three weeks previous to our arrival. He had four men-servants and several horses, and was very much liked by everybody in the hotel. This intelligence gave me a thrill of secret pleasure; for I thought to myself, 'What if this great French Prince should really take it into his head to marry me? Things as unlikely have happened in the world; and I have read in a book that a servant-girl became Empress of Russia. Why should not I, then, become Princess of Chantilly?'—Such ideas as these went running on in my foolish head till I scarcely knew what I was doing; and indeed I did everything wrong that evening,—laying the children down, when I put them to bed, with their feet instead of their heads upon the pillows—and such like nonsensical fooleries. All night long I dreamt of Princes with moustachios, and carriages with four cream-coloured horses, and Gipsy Queens, and Norwood Gipsies, and all kinds of extraordinary things. For the five or six following days I was constantly meeting his Highness—sometimes on the stairs, sometimes in the courtyard of the hotel, and

sometimes in the garden. On each occasion he looked more tender, and at length actually took my hand and pressed it to his lips. I had my gloves on; and I was shocked to think that they were not of white kid at the moment when I received this distinguished honour. Altogether I was so confused that everything seemed to be turning round, and my head appeared to be swimming. Having pressed my hand in that manner, the Prince hurried away; and I was left in the garden—for it was there this little incident happened—to think of the good fortune which evidently awaited me. That same evening the Prince dined again with Lord and Lady Harlesdon; and as I was running down stairs to procure something I wanted, between ten and eleven o'clock, whom should I see cross the landing but his Highness, more elegantly dressed than ever and with a star upon his breast! I really thought I should faint; for in every way—pretty nearly—did it seem as if the Gipsy Queen's prophecy was to be fulfilled—for I now put her old mother's additional prediction about *three* Princes altogether out of the question. Well, as I was saying, I nearly fainted on thus encountering his Highness: but he caught me in his arms, said something very fond and pretty, and kissed me. To tell you the truth, Mary," added Jemima, with a mixture of seriousness and archness, "I did not cry out and was by no means angry. The sudden opening of a door on the landing made him loosen his hold on me all in an instant; and he went one way while I went another. The next day he sought me in the garden as usual: for I must tell you that the winters in Italy are very mild, and though it was the month of February there was scarcely any winter at all in Florence. Besides, there are such quantities of evergreens that a garden there has nothing like a wintry appearance. I mention these circumstances to account for how it was that on the occasion of which I am now speaking, I was enabled to walk with the Prince in a shady avenue where we could not be observed by any one from the hotel windows. The three children were playing up and down the walk, while the Prince began talking to me in a strain which made my heart go pit-a-pat with Oh! such a singular sensation. He said that I was the prettiest young woman he had ever seen in his life—that he had been in England a great deal—and that he was very fond of English people. He then fell to telling me of his palaces, and mansions, and estates in France—the number of servants he kept—his equipages—and the favour he was in at Court. You may conceive the pleasure and suspense with which I listened to him; and when at last he told me that he had conceived a very great affection for me, I think—if I remember right—that I actually shrieked out with joy. I suppose that I must have been nearly falling; or else why did he catch me in his arms and give me another good hearty kiss? Well, I scarcely knew what I was doing or what I said; and he went on to observe that he had no doubt I was a very discreet young woman—respectable and steady—and he did not see why I should not make an excellent Princess. I had presence of mind enough to make haste and confirm him in the good opinion he had formed of me. I told him how long I had been in her ladyship's service—that I was convinced I should make him a good economical wife—and that as a proof of my thrifty habits I had already saved up seventy-six pounds. He seemed very much delighted at this account of myself—told me for the present to say nothing of what had taken place between us—but gave me to understand that I might consider myself engaged to become his wife. He then kissed me again and hurried away."

Here Jemima paused once more to relieve her feelings with a profound sigh; and I could not help pitying my poor friend, notwithstanding the folly of her conduct, when I saw two tears trickling down her cheeks.

"Ah! it was very cruel," she said, "to have such fine hopes completely destroyed. I was nearly wild with joy; and when the Prince had left me, I rushed up to the children and kissed them all three with such warmth that they seemed quite astonished. It served as a vent for my excited feelings, and did me good. I then began to arrange a thousand plans in my head. First I thought how my dear parents and brothers and sisters in England would be astonished when I wrote and told them that I was Princess of Chantilly, and sent them a thousand guineas or so by way of a trifling memorial. Then I reflected that I should actually be of a higher rank than my master and mistress; but I made up my mind not to show them any pride or make them feel little in my presence. Thirdly I discussed with myself what I would wear on my wedding-day, and what I looked best in; also to whom I should give the contents of my boxes. Fourthly I settled in my mind the dresses that I should wear when at my future husband's palace; and I even went so far as to fancy that I saw myself in white brocaded satin and ostrich plumes, presented at the French Court. But if I went on telling you all the silly things I thus gave way to, it would fill a volume. You may suppose that throughout the following night after the Prince's formal declaration of love, I could not sleep a wink; and I longed for the next day to come, to see what more he would have to tell me. Well, the next day came at last; and I was in the garden with the children a full half-hour earlier than usual. The Prince speedily joined me, and began by embracing me very affectionately indeed. He then proceeded to tell me that he had been thinking a great deal of what had taken place between us on the preceding day—that he was resolved to marry me, and would make immediate arrangements for the purpose; but that I must excuse him if ere taking so serious a step, he requested that I would give him such guarantees of my respectability and fitness for a wife as I was able to produce. I begged his Highness to speak to Lady Harlesdon upon the subject: but he very delicately hinted that when a great Prince married below himself, it was always in a private and secret manner; and that so soon as the nuptial knot was tied he should hurry me off into France, take me to his principal estate, muster his thousand tenants around him, and then after a due tribute to my virtues, my beauty, and my amiable qualifications, end by exclaiming, 'Behold the Princess de Chantilly!'—There was something so delightful in this plan that I was enraptured with it. It reminded me so strongly of the plays I had often seen at the theatres in London, and the scenes I had read in some of those beautiful novels of the Minerva press. But what was I to do for such guarantees as his

Highness required? All I could offer was to produce three or four letters I had received at different times from my mother, calling me a good and excellent girl, and saying she was delighted to hear how pleased Lady Harlesdon was with me. But then my poor mother wrote such a curious hand, just for all the world as if she scrawled with the point of a skewer—up and down too in wavy lines, and scarcely as readable as a butcher's bill. So I hesitated to display such letters to a great Prince. Yet why not, I reflected on second thoughts. He knew that I was only a poor servant; and he loved me for myself alone. Such were my ideas; and so I tremblingly explained to his Highness that the only guarantees I could possibly afford of my respectability, were my dear mother's letters and my seventy-six pounds of savings. The Prince, with the most affable manner in the world, complimented me on my frankness and candour, and declared that such proofs of my respectability as I spoke of were all that he required. He accordingly bade me meet him again in the evening, at seven o'clock, and in that very same shady avenue of the garden, when he would tell me what farther arrangements he had made in the meantime for our marriage. He then snatched a kiss while the children were not looking, and hastened away, twirling his beautiful moustache. Oh! how I counted the hours until the moment of appointment came: for I of course looked upon everything as being quite as good as settled. Never did a day seem so long in passing! I could not eat a morsel of food, and constantly found myself giving way to the wildest dreams. At length the hour came when I was to meet the Prince according to his bidding. I got one of the other female servants to stay with the children while I, with some sufficient excuse, went out for half-an-hour. But instead of leaving the precincts of the hotel, I merely descended as slyly as possible to the garden, with my mother's letters and the seventy-six pounds in my pocket. The Prince was there, waiting for me: but he appeared to be in a desperate hurry. Indeed, he hastened to assure me that being engaged to a grand ball at the Grand Duke of Tuscany's, nothing but his devoted love for me could have induced him to delay his toilet in order to keep the appointment. Of course I felt highly flattered by this declaration, the more so as he went on to assure me that though the Grand Duke was trying to hook him for his niece the Princess of Pisa, yet that he would sacrifice all the Princesses of Pisa in the world for the sake of me. I was foolish enough to weep with joy at all the words he uttered; and at his request, produced the letters and the money, which last was done up in a small paper parcel. 'Now, my dear girl,' said he, cramming them all, both letters and parcel, into one of the pockets of his elegantly-fitting surtout, 'I cannot possibly examine these things at present, because I must hurry up to dress to go to the ball. But I should not even go to the Duke's at all, were I not fearful of offending his Serene Highness, who would write off straight and tell the King of France; and then the King would be so angry that he would never consent to receive either me or my pretty Princess'—and he squeezed my hand significantly—'at his Royal Court. But I will look over all you have placed in my hands very early to-morrow morning, and you must meet me here immediately after breakfast at nine o'clock. We shall then steal out of the hotel together, and go and get married at once. I have made all the arrangements with the Archbishop of Florence for the purpose.'—My head swam at this intelligence, and I felt dizzy with joy. I begged his Highness not to offend the Grand Duke or the King of France on any account; whereupon he embraced me tenderly and hurried off into the hotel. I remained in the garden for some minutes to smooth down my feelings as well as I could, and then re-entered the hotel also."

"And had you no suspicion that you were being duped?" I inquired, astonished at Jemima's simple credulity.

"Not the slightest, Mary," she answered. "Indeed, I never once thought of the money at all: or if I did, it gave me no uneasiness at being in his Highness's hands. Could I possibly suppose that a great Prince, with horses and servants at the hotel, and who had formed the acquaintance of my master and mistress, meant to deceive a poor servant-girl so cruelly? Yet such was the case. For after lying awake all night, thinking of my good fortune, when I got up in the morning at about seven o'clock, the chamber-maid of the hotel, who could speak a little English, told me a sad piece of news on coming to lay the cloth for the children's breakfast. In short, a startling exposure had taken place. The Prince had disappeared on the preceding evening, leaving his bill at the hotel unpaid, and his servants without a farthing of wages, to shift for themselves as they could. I was so astounded that any one might have knocked me down with a straw; and if the chamber-maid had not been in a very great hurry to go to some other room, I should no doubt have betrayed my feelings. As it was, I had a good cry; and then being relieved, saw the necessity of holding my tongue if I did not wish to be cruelly laughed at and ridiculed for my folly. To make a long story short, however, it appeared from what I subsequently learnt, that the Prince was no Prince at all—nothing but a mere French adventurer without either title or money. The horses he had obtained under false pretences at Genoa, and had not paid for them: his grooms he had hired at the same place; and thus on arriving at Florence, had been enabled to make a grand show. All this was found out through the horse-dealer at Genoa who had traced him to Florence, and whose sudden appearance at the hotel on the previous night, and consequently within an hour or two after my last meeting with the sham Prince in the garden, had caused his abrupt departure. It farther appeared that he had managed to borrow a couple of hundred pounds of Lord Harlesdon, also on the previous evening, by representing that he had a sudden need of the money and it was too late to go to his banker's. But one of the worst features in all this, apart from my own case, was his treatment of the English groom, whom he had taken away from a good master in Genoa, and whom he had managed to wheedle out of his little savings amounting to some forty or fifty pounds. The police were put upon the alert; but the swindler managed to get clear off. And such was the end of my adventure with the French Prince."

Scarcely had Jemima thus finished her story, when a waiter came up to state that the carriages

were in readiness and that she must come down with the children immediately, as Lord Harlesdon was impatient to depart. Not choosing to be seen by his lordship, I resolved to remain in the room where I was, until the equipages had quitted the hotel. Jemima bade me an affectionate farewell, and promised to write shortly. I kissed the children, whom Jemima then hastened to conduct down stairs; and when from the window I beheld the three travelling-carriages leave the hotel, I also took my departure.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE PICKED-UP LETTER.

As it was now only three o'clock and the conveyance by which I was to return to Ashford did not leave till five, I had a couple of hours to dispose of as best I could. So I thought of taking a walk to the Dane John, which I may as well observe, for the benefit of those who are not acquainted with Canterbury, is a beautiful pleasure-ground, laid out in walks with avenues of trees, borders of flowers, and groups of shrubs. One side is bounded by a high rampart belonging to the old city-fortifications, and this is also a favourite promenade with the ladies and gentlemen of Canterbury. There is a very high mound, with winding walks ascending to the summit, on which stands a sort of monument or obelisk, with seats conveniently arranged round it. From this eminence there is a very beautiful view, not only of the city and its fine old cathedral with its three stately towers and numerous pinnacles, but likewise of the adjacent country for several miles round.

To the Dane John did I accordingly bend my way, thinking of all the particulars of my interview with poor Lady Harlesdon and the story that I had heard from Jemima's lips. I pitied them both—the exquisite miseries endured by the former, and the foolish credulity of the latter. On entering the Dane John, which presented an aspect of verdure notwithstanding the advanced state of the autumn season and the near approach of winter, I still continued meditating upon those topics; and it was rather mechanically than designedly that I ascended the mound and reached the top of the eminence. There I sat down on one of the seats at the base of obelisk, and was contemplating the view that stretched before me, when I observed two persons ascending the circuitous walk leading up to the same spot. One of those persons was the Count de Montville!

I was so astonished on thus recognizing my master, that I did not immediately notice what sort of a person his companion was. The reader will remember that it had been understood at the Willow House that his lordship had repaired to Canterbury on the preceding day in the carriage with the avowed intention of taking the first coach that should pass through the city on its way to Dover; and therefore my surprise may be accounted for on thus beholding my master still in Canterbury. Had he not left the Willow House in such haste in order to lose no time in proceeding to the Continent? how was it then that he was thus lingering in Canterbury, and, as I felt assured, unknown to his wife? But who was the individual with him? On recovering from the first feeling of surprise I looked again to gratify my curiosity on that head. The Count's companion was a shabbily dressed man, with what is called a cut-away green coat and brass buttons, only one of which was fastened across the chest. He had on one of those long yellow-striped waistcoats which grooms and hostlers are accustomed to wear—a dirty white neck-cloth—a narrow brimmed hat, with the crown tapering up like a chimney-pot—and a pair of drab trousers much the worse for wear. He was about thirty years of age—short in stature—and slightly made. There was nothing actually ill-looking in his personal appearance, apart from his shabbiness; and altogether he seemed like one of those hangers-on that are constantly observed lurking about horse depots and stable-yards in London.

What on earth could the brilliant and fastidious Count de Montville have to do with such a man as this? Such was the question that naturally occurred to me the moment I had informed myself by a hasty glance of the appearance of my master's companion. All the suspicions that for the last two or three days had been engendered in my mind relative to the Count, were suddenly revived and strengthened; and the story I had so recently heard from Jemima relative to the doings of a French adventurer, doubtless had its weight in thus increasing my misgivings with respect to my master. But I had not much leisure for reflection. Should I remain there until the Count and his companion reached the summit? or should I hasten away by a path on the opposite side of the mound from that which they were ascending? While I was yet deliberating, it became too late to move from the place where I was, without being compelled to pass his lordship and the man who was with him; and somehow or another I felt an unconquerable aversion to meeting my master at this moment. I really feared lest it should seem as if I were there to espy his actions.

While ascending to the top of the mound, the Count had casually glanced up, and as a matter of course had beheld a female seated there: but as I instantaneously averted my head, he did not catch a glimpse of my countenance; and it was also evident that he did not recognize me by my dress. Not knowing that I was to be at Canterbury so soon after himself, he could not possibly suspect who I was without seeing my face.

He and his companion reached the eminence where the obelisk stood; and I heard the man say in a half sullen, half insolent tone, "Now, what's the use of having come all the way up here to talk over this matter? You see we are not a bit more private than we were down below——"

"Yes—we are more free from observation," replied the Count. "As for that woman," he immediately added, in a lower tone, "who is sitting round there, behind the monument, she can't catch what we say——"

But I did though; and finding that I was thus to become a listener against my will if I remained where I was, I determined to stay there no longer. Accordingly, rising from my seat, I passed rapidly round the obelisk on the opposite side from that where the Count and his companion had halted; and by still keeping my face averted in a particular

direction, succeeded in getting away without being recognized by my master. Descending the winding pathway with rapid steps, I was soon at the bottom of the mound; and when about to turn away from the precincts thereof and make for the avenue of trees, I observed a letter lying upon the ground. Picking it up with the view of ascertaining to whom it belonged, so that if it were of importance I might take measures to restore it to its owner, I opened it and read these lines:—

"Canterbury, October 15th, 1829.

"Sir,

"I have found out where you are, and what you are doing; but I don't want to make mischief, or disturb you in your pursuits, if you only deal honourable to me. I am in distress and want my money. So if you choose to come over to Canterbury to-morrow, or on the 17th, you will find me in the middle avenue of the Dane John, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. If you don't come either to-morrow or next day, then you will compel me to come over to you. I need say no more.

"Your humble servant,

"JOHN WILSON."

This letter had no address upon it, because it had evidently been enclosed in an envelope, on which the direction would therefore have been written. But the envelope was not now with the letter; and consequently I could not ascertain to whom it belonged. But while I still held it in my hand, a suspicion flashed like lightning through my brain. I remembered the letter which my master had received on the previous day when walking with the Countess in the garden—how troubled he had been on perusing that letter—how hastily he had thrust it into his pocket—and how it had bred a quarrel between her ladyship and himself. Then that sudden journey immediately after the receipt of the letter which had so much disturbed him—and now his appearance in the Dane John with so unsuitable a companion between the very hours mentioned in the stray epistle I had just picked up—all tended to confirm my suspicion!

"Yes," thought I to myself, "it is as clear as daylight. This letter which I hold in my hand is doubtless the one my master received yesterday; and he has within the last few minutes accidentally dropped it from his pocket. Perhaps the man did not keep the appointment yesterday? or perhaps the Count himself did not keep it? and thus they are meeting to-day. But who is this John Wilson, who writes thus authoritatively to him, and with the cool insolence of one who feels that he holds him in his power? And why address him as *sir?* wherefore not as *my lord?* Ah! perhaps the letter has nothing to do with the Count after all; and it is merely a combination of circumstances and coincidences that led me to form such a conjecture?"

Yet the longer I thought upon the whole affair, the more was I convinced that the letter *did* belong to the Count, and that it was in pursuance thereof that he had come to the Dane John to meet the individual with whom I had seen him. Besides, the words which the man had uttered and the way in which he had spoken when they reached the top of the mound ere now, all savoured of that same cool insolence which characterized the letter I had picked up; and therefore, everything considered, it was impossible to doubt any longer that my first conjecture was the right one.

I had a great mind to fling the letter upon the ground again and leave it to its fate; then I thought of tearing it up into small pieces and scattering it to the winds: but while thus deliberating, I had walked to a distance from the base of the mound, and so not choosing to return for the purpose of throwing back the letter where I had found it—nor yet liking to tear it up—I put it into my pocket.

As I proceeded towards the office whence the conveyance for Ashford was to start, I continued to revolve in my mind all the suspicious circumstances which had just come to my knowledge in respect to the Count: for if this letter really had been addressed to him, as I could not doubt, what was I to think of him? I trembled for my poor mistress: for I felt assured that if there were indeed anything wrong with her husband, his circumstances and his affairs, she had been most cruelly deceived. I never ceased thinking of the subject during the whole of the ride in the conveyance from Canterbury to Ashford. I resolved not to inform my mistress that I had seen the Count at Canterbury: for in the first place it was no business of mine—and in the second place, I should have been the last person in the world to have said anything to make mischief between herself and her husband. I however wondered whether he really intended to proceed to France at all; or whether his French journey was only a suddenly devised excuse in order to meet the man John Wilson in the Dane John in pursuance of that person's letter.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening when I reached the Willow House; and the first intelligence I received was that Mr. Appleton, the Countess's uncle, had suddenly and unexpectedly arrived from London about an hour previously. Although I did not see this gentleman until the next day, I may as well describe him at once. He was a person of about sixty years of age—short and stout—dressed in an old-fashioned style, with knee-breeches and gaiters—and looking indeed very much like one of those rich uncles who figure upon the stage, always coming at the nick of time to bestow a fortune upon some graceless nephew, who however gets a good rating before he is thus forgiven and made happy. Mr. Appleton had not exactly a stern look, but a sort of business-like matter-of-fact air of shrewdness and caution: he seemed a gentleman perfectly capable of doing a liberal and benevolent act, but also one who would show no mercy to a swindler or adventurer seeking to get the better of him or any one connected with him. He was an old bachelor, —had but lately retired from a mercantile business in the City of London—and was reputed to be very well off.

Such was Mr. Appleton, whom the Countess brought up into the nursery when I and the children were having our breakfasts on the morning after the adventures at Canterbury. Mr. Appleton had on a figured silk dressing-gown of flaming colours; and as his light brown wig was a little awry at the time, he struck me as being a rather strange-looking person. Master Richard, instantly recognizing his uncle, jumped down from his chair and ran towards him; but little Miss Emma, who, it appeared, stood in mortal terror of the old gentleman, set up a terrific squall which could only be appeased by her mamma taking her upon her lap and doing all she could to pacify her.

"Well, Richard. I hope you are a good boy?" said

Mr. Appleton, with a half-severe look, as if he were somewhat inclined to suspect the contrary. "What is this young woman's name?" he inquired of the Countess, at the same time looking very hard at me, as if to assure himself that I was a fit and proper person to be entrusted with the charge of his little nephew and niece.

"Mary Price, uncle," answered the Countess.

"Hum!" said Mr. Appleton: and then he gave a short cough. "I believe that you are the young person who figured in a certain trial down at Derby —are you not?"

I replied that I was; and I felt somewhat confused, for I thought that Mr. Appleton was eyeing me with suspicion and dislike; although being conscious of no wrong, I could not conceive wherefore he should thus regard me with prejudice.

"Well," he proceeded to say, "I don't like heroines generally: they rather belong to romance than real life, and I never knew anything of the romantic kind turn out well yet. But however, she looks a very respectable girl, and I dare say is so. Besides," he added, his voice and manner both becoming kinder as he spoke, "when I come to recollect, she behaved uncommonly well on that occasion down at Derby, and was complimented by the Judge."

"And I can assure you, uncle," said the Countess, "she has behaved herself in a most exemplary manner during the three months she has been in my service. She belongs to Ashford, and has brothers and sisters here to whom she has been very kind and set an excellent example."

"Hum!" again said Mr. Appleton: "these are high praises. Well, my dear," he continued, addressing himself to me, "continue to be a good girl, and you will get on in the world. Don't mind what I said just now about not liking heroines, and so forth. I did not mean to wound your feelings. But I am rather slow in forming good opinions of

people. When once I do, however, I always like them. Now, from what your mistress has just told me, I have formed a good opinion of *you*."

"Oh, uncle!" said Master Richard, who perhaps fancied by Mr. Appleton's manner that he was scolding me, "don't be cross to Mary: she is so good and kind to us—and me and Emma do love her so!"

"There!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton: "I would sooner have that child's testimony than any other. You are a good girl, Mary—that's clear enough; and I am glad to find the children in such hands. Here—buy yourself a new gown:"—and the old gentleman, dipping his hand deep down into his capacious pocket, took out a sovereign which he offered me.

I however declined taking it, assuring him that I was very liberally paid by my mistress, and that I required no other inducement to prompt me to do my duty.

"Hum!" said Mr. Appleton, gazing upon me in astonishment: then, after a pause, he exclaimed, "What! a servant-girl refuse money? Well then, it shan't be money that I will give you:"—and dropping the gold back into his pocket, he turned abruptly round and quitted the nursery, followed by the Countess.

After dinner in the evening the children were had down into the dining-room when the dessert was placed upon the table; and I was accordingly left alone in the nursery. But I was not long without company: for the lady's-maid, who was a very good-natured young woman, and particularly friendly toward me, stepped in to have a few minutes' conversation.

"Do you know, Mary," she said, after a few remarks not worth recording, "I can't help thinking there is something wrong here?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, surprised at her observation; because I could not conjecture what had transpired to arouse such a suspicion on her part.

"Why, you see," she continued, "this Mr. Appleton, the Countess's uncle, has come down so very sudden and unexpected. Her ladyship told me this morning that Mr. Appleton had been offended with her for having married the Count, because he wished her, if she did marry a second time, to bestow her hand upon a retired linendraper of his acquaintance. But, as her ladyship observed in a confidential manner to me, it was not likely she would throw herself away upon a tradesman, when a nobleman offered to marry her. Besides, she was desperately in love with the Count. However, her ladyship seemed very much pleased to think that her uncle should have come down of his own accord and made it up with her. But I know what it was that Mr. Appleton *did* come down for," added the lady's-maid with a sly look: "for from something her ladyship dropped to me when she was in a confidential humour this morning, she had written to her uncle to request an advance of some money until the arrival of the Count's remittances from France: but Mr. Appleton had sent back a point-blank refusal. Then it appears that thinking better of it, he followed close after his letter and came down to examine the aspect of affairs for himself."

"And why," I asked, "should you suspect that there is something wrong from all you have told me?"

"Oh! there are many little things that have made me fancy so," returned the lady's-maid. "In the first place, all that business about the somnambulism was not natural: it did not look right—and Septimus says the more he sees of the Count, the more he is convinced he has something on his mind. He sometimes has a nervous restless manner about him, particularly if the door is opened rather suddenly: and two or three times when Septimus has been up to his dressing-room to say that somebody wanted to see him, he has always appeared so anxious to know who it was—and if the person had not by any accident given his name, then he would inquire what sort of a looking individual it was—and all those kind of things. Besides, Septimus says that the Count never treats him as a valet, and does not even seem to know what are the exact duties that a valet ought to perform. For instance, he won't allow Septimus to help him in his toilet in the slightest degree; and once or twice when he has been dressing in his own dressing-room, he has seemed very much agitated and annoyed if Septimus has entered without knocking. Then, too, Septimus says—and Septimus, mind you, is a very shrewd man—that the Count talks too much of his estates and his mansions in France, and of his high acquaintances in Paris. But what has also struck me, is that the Count's hands are so very coarse. Everybody must admit he is a very fine man—exceedingly good-looking—and a perfect gentleman in his manners; and it does seem so very odd that he should have such dreadful vulgar hands. They really look as if he had done hard work during some time of his life. Then there's another thing," continued the loquacious lady's-maid, "his lordship scarcely ever drinks anything but water at his dinner, and never more than one or two glasses of wine at the outside afterwards: and this seems so strange for a great nobleman accustomed to every luxury. Septimus does not hesitate to hint that he thinks it is because the Count is afraid of letting out some unpleasant secrets, if he happens to take a drop too much."

"Really I think," was the exclamation I now uttered, "that Mr. Septimus goes a little too far in making his lordship's temperance a motive of suspicion or reproach."

"Ah! but when it is coupled with all the other things I have mentioned," said the lady's-maid, "the argument is not without its force. And I will tell you more," she added in a confidential tone; "Mr. Appleton has been privately questioning Septimus to-day a great deal about the Count. Septimus told me so himself just now: because of course you know, Mary, that Mr. Septimus and I are engaged to be married; and therefore he has very few secrets from me. Mr. Appleton spoke in a manner as if he did not exactly wish Septimus to perceive that he was pumping him: but such it really was—and Septimus saw through it plain enough. So it's my opinion that Mr. Appleton fancies there is a screw loose somewhere, and has come down on purpose to see about it. In fact, I am pretty sure that it is so; and what's more, I am convinced that Mr. Appleton has written off to Paris to make inquiries about the Count: for this afternoon he gave James a letter to take into town to the post, and that letter was directed to the Prefect of Police in Paris. Now, Mr. Septimus, who knows everything, says

that the Prefect of Police is a great officer at the head of all the constables in France; and that he has got books giving an account of everybody and everything. So, for what reason could Mr. Appleton write to the Prefect if not to make inquiries about the Count? Well, for my part, I do sincerely hope that everything will turn out all right: but I very much fear the contrary!"—and the lady's-maid shook her head ominously.

I had listened to this long speech because I could not possibly interrupt it: for my fellow-servant spoke with great volubility, although in the low tone of mysterious confidence. She was going on to make some farther observations, when the bell in the nursery was rung with some degree of violence; and the summons being for me, I hastened down stairs, thinking that I was wanted to bring the children up from the dining-room. It is true that I *was* wanted there—but not for that immediate purpose.

On entering the room I saw that the Countess looked somewhat agitated, while Mr. Appleton was sitting up in his chair with a severe kind of magisterial aspect; so that I immediately saw there was something wrong, and could not help feeling myself in the position of one summoned before a domestic tribunal to give an account or explanations on some point that was involved in doubt or suspicion. As for the two children, Master Richard was eating nuts and Miss Emma sucking an orange with great relish.

"Come in, Mary—and shut the door," said Mr. Appleton, in a severe tone and with a stern mysterious look.

I advanced towards the table, and stood waiting to be questioned farther.

"Do you know anything of a letter," Mr. Appleton went on to ask, "which Master Richard has had to play with? He brought it down from the nursery, crumpled up in his hand——Hum! you look pale and troubled, young woman?"

And so, heaven knows, I did: for the whole truth instantaneously flashed to my mind. That letter which I had picked up in the Dane John and so unfortunately brought away with me, must have dropped from my pocket and got into little Richard's hands!

"Do you know anything about such a letter?" asked the Countess with feverish anxiety.

I could not answer—my lips were sealed—and I felt myself turning red and pale a dozen times in as many moments; while the gaze of Mr. Appleton was fixed upon me with a stern and searching severity.

"There is something here which must be investigated," he said in a voice that sounded awfully magisterial to my ears. "Go and take these children up to the nursery—leave them in charge of one of your fellow-servants—and come down here immediately again. Immediately, mind!" he added, with a look and voice which seemed to imply a suspicion that he thought it highly probable I might either barricade myself up in the nursery, or run away from the Willow House altogether.

"Yes—for heaven's sake make haste!" said the Countess: and it was not difficult to perceive she was a prey to the most torturing anxiety, which she vainly endeavoured to conceal from me as much as she could

I hastened to obey the command I had received: for I saw in a temporary retreat from the dining-room an opportunity of collecting my confused and bewildered ideas in a manner to enable me to decide upon the course to be pursued. I accordingly took the two children up-stairs; and leaving them in charge of the lady's-maid, who was still in the nursery, descended to the dining-room again. I was not absent more than five minutes: but during that interval I had resolved how to act. The reader will not require to be told that I was determined upon telling the truth, to the extent that I had found the letter in the Dane John at Canterbury: but whether I should state any farther particulars, I felt must depend upon the nature of the questions put to me. I however hoped that I should not be forced into revelations calculated to make the Countess unhappy.

It was with composed looks that I re-entered the dining-room, where I found Mr. Appleton still seated with a sternly majestic mien in a great arm-chair; while the Countess, who had evidently been walking to and fro, no doubt in the agitation of suspense, hastily went back to her place upon the sofa.

"Now, Mary Price," said Mr. Appleton, "tell me at once whether you know anything of the letter to which I just now alluded?"

"Show her the letter, uncle," said the Countess nervously.

"Hum! not quite yet! Mary, do you know any person of the name of John Wilson? have you ever heard of that name before?"

"Yes, sir," I answered in a firm voice. "I have seen that name at the bottom of a letter."

"Hum! then you have read the letter itself?"

"I have, sir."

"And this is the letter?" continued Mr. Appleton, producing from his waistcoat pocket the unfortunate document I had picked up as already described.

I took it—glanced my eye over it—and handing it back again, said, "This is the letter I have seen."

"Where? how?" demanded the Countess de Montville, with intense anxiety.

"My lady," I replied, "I picked it up yesterday, in the Dane John at Canterbury."

"Hum! the Dane John!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton. "And do you know anything more about the letter than what its contents seem to indicate? Come, Mary—you remember what I told you this morning, that I had formed a good opinion of you; and you must speak out candidly if you wish to preserve it."

"Do, Mary, tell us anything you may know concerning this letter!"—and there was indescribable anguish in the voice of the Countess.

I was now cruelly embarrassed; and feeling deeply for my poor mistress, who, I saw, was racked by the most torturing suspicions, I threw upon her a look full of compassion.

"Mary," said Mr. Appleton, adopting a kinder tone and manner, "I see that you do know something; and I do understand the motives which make you hesitate to reveal it. But you must tell us everything. Surely you can have nothing to fear?"

"No, sir—not on my own account," I ex-

claimed. "But——" and I glanced towards my mistress.

"Mary, I conjure you to speak out!" said the Countess. "Tell me what you know. Everything—anything, were better than this harrowing suspense! Speak, my dear girl—speak!"

But I need not dwell longer than is necessary upon this scene. Suffice it to say that I was forced to divulge all the circumstances that had happened on the previous day in the Dane John,—how I had seen the Count de Montville—how he was accompanied by a person, whom I described—how I had avoided being recognized by him—and how I had picked up the letter at the foot of the mound. My unfortunate mistress burst into tears, and wrung her hands bitterly. I flew to the sofa, and bent over her in a soothing manner, but attempting nothing consolatory in the shape of words: for what was there to say? Mr. Appleton looked exceedingly dark and serious; and for several minutes he observed a profound silence.

"Mary," exclaimed the Countess, taking my hand and pressing it in her own, "I thank you for that generous consideration which would have induced you to keep all that you have now told us entirely secret from me, had you not been compelled to reveal it."

"Ah! my lady," I exclaimed, "I never shall forgive myself for my carelessness in allowing that letter to escape from my possession."

"You have nothing to reproach yourself with on that account," said my poor mistress, down whose cheeks the tears were streaming quickly. "It was an accident that might have occurred to anybody. But, Oh! Mary—what must you think? what must you suspect? My God, I shall go mad! I shall go mad!"

"For heaven's sake, compose your feelings, my lady," I said; "and perhaps everything will be cleared up in a satisfactory manner."

"Hum! satisfactory indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton. "Mary Price, you are a discreet and prudent young woman; and I need scarcely tell you how necessary it is that you should observe—at least for the present—the strictest silence relative to what you have now seen or heard."

"Rest assured, sir," I answered, "that it was not even necessary to express your wishes on that point. Every secret that happens to come to my knowledge—and heaven knows that I do not seek them!—is sacred with me."

"Hum!" observed Mr. Appleton. "You will make a good wife for some honest man one of these days. Why, actually my remark has made you blush! But come—let us talk seriously. It is now of the highest consequence that I should see this John Wilson at Canterbury; and you must accompany me to-morrow morning, Mary, to that city, to point him out to me if we can happen to run against him: for as he gives no place of abode in his letter, it may prove rather a difficult search. But still a fellow like that will most probably be lounging and loitering about; and so you must come with me."

"I hope you will excuse me, sir," I answered. "It is not for me, a humble servant, to mix myself up in these matters:"—and I glanced towards the Countess to glean, if possible, from her looks, her opinion upon the point. But she was sitting in the abstracted mood of dark despair, and did not appear to have been listening to what her uncle had said to me.

"Well, well, Mary," observed Mr. Appleton, "you shall not be forced into anything against your will. You can think over the matter, and let me know early to-morrow morning."

I then left the dining-room, and ascended to the nursery, where the lady's-maid was giving the children their tea. She was very anxious to know why I had been detained so long down stairs; but I managed to evade giving any explanations, and yet without telling an untruth. Fortunately she was soon summoned away to attend upon the Countess, who, alleging sudden indisposition, had retired to her chamber.

The longer I thought upon everything I now knew or surmised relative to the Count de Montville, the more convinced was I that the marriage would turn out a very unfortunate one for my poor mistress. It was quite evident that Mr. Appleton suspected the same, and was resolved to ascertain everything connected with the Count—either to satisfy himself that he was an honest man, or to unmask him as a base adventurer. With regard to accompanying Mr. Appleton to Canterbury to assist in the investigation, I had pretty well resolved to lend myself to nothing of the sort, unless enjoined to do so by my mistress: for I would not willingly seek to rush into adventures of this kind. But my thoughts on that head were destined to experience a complete revolution—as the reader will immediately see.

On the following morning the postman from Ashford happened to come at an earlier hour than usual; and he brought me a letter, the contents of which ran thus:—

"Harlesdon House, London.
"October 18th, 1829.

"My dear Mary,

We arrived here safe and sound, at a late hour last night; and I should not perhaps have written to you so soon, had it not been that I have something curious to tell you. Indeed, it is a very strange coincidence, happening so close upon the heels of the conversation you and I had together at the hotel. You remember that in my story of the sham Prince I spoke of an English groom, whom he had in his service at Florence, and whom he so infamously robbed and left without wages or money of any kind, to shift for himself in a foreign land too! I ought to have added that some English families, who were in Florence at the time, hearing of the circumstance, made a subscription for the poor fellow, to enable him to get back to this country. But now for the incident of yesterday. As the carriage in which I and one of her ladyship's maids were seated with the children, was turning out of the hotel, who should I see lounging about opposite the gate but this very self-same groom that the mock Prince took in? I knew him directly; and very shabby did the poor fellow look. Ah! his green coat with brass buttons, in the vulgar cut-away style—his drab trousers—and his ugly-shaped hat, all going up in the crown just as if it was a sugar-loaf with the point knocked off,—made him look very different indeed from what he was when in the splendid livery of light blue and silver lace at Florence. Was it not singular that I should thus see the poor man within a very few minutes after I had been talking to you about him? I forget his name: but I rather think it was Wilson.

"I shall write again soon, and tell you all the news. So no more at present from

"Your affectionate friend,
"JEMIMA WILKINSON."

Here was a discovery!—for the astounding fact was thus indisputably revealed to me, that the Count de Montville could be none other than the same infamous adventurer who under the name of the Prince de Chantilly had so cruelly duped and robbed poor Jemima at Florence. The motive of John Wilson's letter became apparent in an instant; and the Count's trouble on receiving such an unwelcome missive, when walking with his wife in the garden, was but too well explained. My master, then, was nothing more than a common swindler—neither Prince, nor Count, nor anything of the sort—but an adventurer of the most heartless description. Yes—this was a discovery which not for a single instant could I doubt; and I even marvelled within myself that it had not struck me when listening to Jemima's tale, how great was the resemblance between the self-styled Count de Montville and the picture she had drawn of the sham Prince de Chantilly. But then, she had represented the hero of her narrative to be little more than thirty, whereas the Count was forty; and it was this discrepancy which had no doubt prevented me from being struck by the similitude which in other respects existed between the portraits of my master and her Prince. Ah, poor Jemima! she was so blinded by her foolish affection as to fancy her princely lover younger than he really was; or else her little vanity had induced her to take a few years off the age of the man who had captivated her heart, so that she might not appear in my eyes too ridiculous in having listened to the love-nonsense of a man so much her senior.

Scarcely had I finished the few hurried reflections which were excited by Jemima's letter, when Mr. Appleton came up into the nursery; and having caressed the children,—little Emma being somehow or another now quite reconciled to him, most likely because he had her down to dessert on the previous day,—he said to me, "Well, Mary, what about the journey to Canterbury? Have you made up your mind?"

"I have, sir," was my answer: "and I will go with you."

"Hum! you are rather whimsical, my dear; and yet I thought you of a more steady and decided character."

"But circumstances may change, sir; and such is the case in the present instance."

"Well, you shall explain all this to me presently. Come—the carriage is waiting; and in the hope that you *would* consent to go with me,—for I can assure you it is your mistress's wish,—the arrangements are already made for the children to be with their mother; and she will likewise invent a pretext for your accompanying me. So put on your bonnet and shawl, and make haste."

I speedily obeyed Mr. Appleton's directions; and in a few minutes he and I were seated together inside the carriage, and rolling along the road in the direction of Canterbury.

"Now, Mary," he said, "perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what has induced you to change your mind in respect to this journey."

"You will permit me to speak freely, sir?"

"As freely as you please. I want you to do so."

"Then, sir," I rejoined, "I feel it my duty to lend you all the aid in my power, for the purpose of unmasking an unprincipled adventurer, who I fear has achieved the misery of my poor mistress."

Mr. Appleton gazed upon me with no small degree of astonishment: for he evidently perceived by my manner that I was not speaking at random—nor even giving utterance to a bare conjecture—but proclaiming a fact of the truth of which I was well assured.

"Then it is as I have suspected and feared," said Mr. Appleton, at length breaking silence and speaking in a gloomy tone. "My young friend," he continued,—"for I can scarcely treat you as a servant or an inferior, but in the light of a confidante—you must explain yourself fully to me."

"I will, sir," was my response: and I then proceeded to relate the history which I had heard from Jemima's lips, and to which Mr. Appleton listened with the deepest attention. I concluded by putting into his hand the letter which I had that morning received from Jemima, observing as I did so, "You now understand, sir, wherefore I am convinced that the self-styled Count de Montville is a mere adventurer, and why I deem it a duty to help in exposing him."

"It is indeed but too apparent that my niece has been made the victim of a scoundrel:"—and Mr. Appleton shook his head gravely. "Foolish woman that she has been! She married this Count, as he calls himself, against the wishes of myself and her best friends. She possessed a competency; but she sold out all her money from the Funds on the specious representations of this rascal. Believing that he possessed immense estates, she placed all her own resources at his disposal; and everything has gone in fitting up the Willow House so extravagantly, in giving sumptuous banquets, and in all kinds of fooleries. I never liked that Count from the very first moment I saw him: but I certainly did not suspect that he was a mere swindler, till I received a letter two or three days ago from my niece, telling me that her husband's agents in Paris were unaccountably behind-hand in sending him his proper remittances, and therefore begging me to lend her a thousand pounds or so till they arrived. Then it was that my eyes were opened. I saw through it all in a moment; and I was so enraged to think what a fool she had made of herself, that I resolved never to have anything more to do with her. Indeed, it was with great difficulty at the time that I could bring myself to write her a merely civil answer, declining to accede to her request. But in a few hours I reflected that if her husband really was a villain, it would be a sin not to unmask and punish him. Besides, I pitied the poor children; and so I came down to look into the matter for myself. When I arrived at the Willow House the night before last, I was much disappointed in not finding the Count there; for it was my intention to insist upon his giving me proofs of his respectability. However circumstances have transpired to put us in a track to clear up all doubts. But I had already written to the Prefect of Police in Paris, with the view of obtaining from that high official any particulars which he may be enabled to give me relative to such-and-such a person whom I described; and you may depend upon it, Mary, that I sent such an accurate description of the self-styled Count de Montville that if the Prefect really has any knowledge of him at all, he can't fail to perceive at a

glance whom I am inquiring about. The scoundrel! I will transport him yet."

"Do you not think, sir," I asked, "that it will perhaps be better to hush up the affair to a certain extent, for the sake of her ladyship and the children?"

"*Ladyship!* nonsense!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton testily. "I dare say the villain her husband is as much a Count as he was a Prince. In fact, from what you have already told me, it seemed to be known at Florence that he had not the slightest claim to any title of nobility whatsoever So, as for my niece being a *ladyship*, she will have to go back to her first husband's honest name, and become plain Mrs. Bartlett once more. As for the way I shall deal with the scoundrel himself, it must all depend upon circumstances. Perhaps he has fled for good and never means to come back?"

"On the contrary, sir," I remarked; "you may depend upon it he will return: or else why should he have taken the trouble to meet this John Wilson? It could be for no other purpose than to settle his claim and keep him quiet."

"Hum! you are a shrewd girl," said Mr. Appleton; "and I am glad you have come with me."

In this manner we conversed until we reached Canterbury, where we arrived a little before midday, and at once proceeded to the *Fountain Hotel*. There Mr. Appleton inquired whether such a person as John Wilson was known at the establishment: but he could not hear of any such individual, either by name or by the description of the man's person. We therefore lost no time in sallying forth together on the chance of meeting him; and we had not threaded half-a-dozen streets, when I suddenly caught sight of the object of our search standing at the entrance to a stable-yard and conversing with some hostlers and grooms. I immediately pointed him out to Mr. Appleton, who, leaving me standing at a little distance, at once accosted the man. He was dressed just the same as when I first saw him in the self-styled Count's company in the Dane John, there being not the slightest improvement in his condition. Mr. Appleton took him aside and spoke a few words to him. They then came over together to the spot where I remained standing.

"It is all right, Mary," said Mr. Appleton: "this man *is* John Wilson."

We then returned to the hotel, Wilson following close behind us; and when we were all three in a private room together, Mr. Appleton said, "I will now explain why I have asked you to accompany me hither. You are acquainted with a certain Frenchman who in Italy passed as the Prince de Chantilly, and in England is going by the name of the Count de Montville?"

"Well, sir, I do know such a person," answered Wilson, "and have some little claim on him. But as he has promised to settle it in three or four days and make me a present into the bargain, I would rather not say any harm of him."

"Well, but perhaps I can make it better worth your while to speak out," said Mr. Appleton, "than he can possibly do to make you hold your tongue. In plain terms, we know all about him: that is to say, we have heard enough—too much—and we wish to receive the confirmation of it from your lips. How came you to find out that he was living near Ashford?"

"Why, sir," returned Wilson, "I happened to hear a few days ago from the driver of the Ashford van, which puts up at a public-house where I am lodging, that there was a gentleman of the name of Montville living near Ashford and carrying on a rare game, having a splendid mansion, giving grand parties, and spending a sight of money. So I happened to ask what sort of a gentleman he was. It was only curiosity; for I hadn't a suspicion at the time who this Count might be. So the carrier described him to me; and then I at once knew my man. But I thought that if he was respectably settled, well married, and so on, it would do me no good to spoil him; whereas, on the other hand, he might not only pay me what he owed, but also make me a little present for keeping his secret. So I wrote him a note that I thought would bring him over to Canterbury to meet me at a place I named. He came accordingly, and said he was going up to London——"

"Hum! up to London, eh?" said Mr. Appleton, with a glance towards me, which was as much as to say, "So at all events his French journey was a mere excuse."

"Yes, sir," continued Wilson; "he said he was going up to London to get money, and would be back in a few days, when he would do the thing that was right towards me. He gave me a guinea, which was all he said he could spare; and therefore I thought he meant to act honourable and was satisfied."

"I know how he has treated you," said Mr. Appleton: "his conduct was most scandalous."

"It was indeed, sir. He took me away from a good master at Genoa; and when we were at Florence, by pretending to take care of my savings for me, wheedled me out of all I possessed. Then he cut and bolted; and if it hadn't been for the kindness of a few English families there, I shouldn't have been able to get home to England at all. Since I have been back I have been out of place; and having a few acquaintances at Canterbury, have been knocking about here for the last five or six months. But I hope that now I have told you what you want to know, sir, you will be able to do something for me."

"You shall have your money, and a present into the bargain," said Mr. Appleton. "But where were you to see or hear of the Count again?"

"At the public-house where I am staying, sir. That is to say, he promised to write me a note there and arrange to meet me in the Dane John; because, as he has many acquaintances at Canterbury, he wouldn't like to be seen in company with a poor devil like me in any of the public streets."

"Now then, I will tell you what you must do," said Mr. Appleton. "Remain at your public-house till you hear from the Count according to promise—then go and meet him and get your money from him, if he has it to give you. But whether he pays you or not, don't breathe a word that you have seen anybody who was making inquiries about him; and immediately after you *have* seen him, come straight over to Ashford, take up your quarters there at any place you choose, and send up a note without delay to me. Here is my card; and I shall be at the Willow House, the Count's abode. Now do you understand?"

"I do, sir," replied Wilson.

"Good!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton. "Here is a ten-pound note as an earnest that you will be well rewarded if you punctually follow my directions in all things."

"You may depend upon it, sir, I will do so," rejoined the man.

Mr. Appleton, however, to make sure, repeated his instructions; and Wilson, thoroughly understanding them, took his departure.

"Now, Mary, what do you think of the aspect of affairs?" said Mr. Appleton, as we were seated together at the luncheon which he ordered to be served up. "Everything is confirmed, and your friend Jemima told you the exact truth. But I wonder what on earth the scoundrel can be doing in London? I suppose he has some friend there of whom he will borrow a little money in order to pay this unfortunate man in the hope of silencing him. I know, from my niece, that when he left the Willow House the other day he only took sixty or seventy pounds with him; and so I suppose he did not choose to part with much of that—for you see he only gave the poor fellow a guinea—till he made sure of getting farther supplies in London."

"And pray, sir, may I ask," said I, "since you treat me confidentially in this matter, what your object is in getting Wilson over to Ashford after he has seen the Count—if he ever does happen to see him again?"

"Hum! why am I adopting this course? Just because you yourself, as we were coming over this morning, suggested the prudence of hushing up the affair to a certain extent. I have since been thinking of that recommendation on your part, and don't know but what it is the best course to pursue. So what I mean is to unmask the villain thoroughly—you shall see how when the time comes—and then expel him ignominiously from my presence."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when we re-entered the carriage on our return to Ashford. Immediately on our arrival at the Willow House, Mr. Appleton had a long conference with my mistress, no doubt for the purpose of explaining to her all that had taken place at Canterbury. But I did not see any more of him nor her for the remainder of that day.

Four days afterwards Mr. Appleton received a letter from the Prefect of Police in Paris, stating that as the business on which he had written was of a very grave and serious import, he (the Prefect) would cause the most searching inquiries to be made, and would communicate again with Mr. Appleton in a few days. It was Mr. Appleton himself who told me that he had received such a letter: for the old gentleman not only continued to treat me with the fullest confidence in the affair, but likewise omitted no opportunity of demonstrating his favourable opinion of me. Although the Prefect's letter was so laconic and likewise so vague, it nevertheless seemed to promise some startling revelations; and I must say that I awaited the issue of all these proceedings with much interest and suspense, and with no small degree of anxiety too, for I saw that the health and spirits of my unfortunate mistress were rapidly giving way.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE CATASTROPHE.

It was exactly a week after the visit to Canterbury, that Mr. Appleton one evening received a note from John Wilson, to say that he had just arrived in Ashford and was at a public-house which he named. Mr. Appleton immediately repaired to the place, and had an interview with the man. The substance of what he heard was that Wilson had seen the Count de Montville that day at Canterbury—that the Count had pleaded disappointments in London as an excuse for putting him off—but had given him five guineas, with the promise that in a short time he would settle the remainder. Wilson had appeared to be contented with that arrangement; but immediately upon separating from the Count, had come over to Ashford in accordance with the instructions he had received from Mr. Appleton. This gentleman gave him a farther sum of money, and bade him remain constantly in-doors at the public-house, so as to be in readiness to obey any summons that might be sent to him.

On returning to the Willow House, which he reached at about half-past nine, Mr. Appleton found me in the parlour in company with his niece. For the Countess (as I had better continue to call her for the present) felt so nervous and excited at the prospect of a crisis being at hand, that she could not bear to be alone; and under pretence of giving me her instructions in some particular kind of needlework, had me down to sit with her in the parlour. The other servants could not therefore think it odd under such circumstances, that I was thus temporarily made the companion of our mistress.

Her ladyship did not hesitate to converse with me upon the sad and sorrowful events which were progressing towards a catastrophe; and I perceived that great as her affection for her husband had until recently been, her indignation and hatred for the cheat he had practised upon her were now proportionately strong. Not only did she feel that the best affections of her heart had been made the means of consummating her ruin in respect to property and worldly happiness, but likewise that her pride had been wounded in the most sensitive point; and though she was still addressed as "my lady" and "your ladyship," yet she keenly and deeply felt that she had not the remotest right to those sounding titles. Thus was it that from the first hour when the gravest suspicions were excited relative to her husband, by the circumstance of Wilson's letter falling into her little son's hands, she had countenanced Mr. Appleton in pursuing his investigations and following up the clue he had obtained to the unravelment of the mystery of the Count's character. So far from endeavouring to induce her uncle to hush up the affair or pause in his inquiries, she not only felt anxious to know the worst that she might ascertain the extent of her misfortune, but longed for the return of her husband that she might overwhelm him with reproaches. It was not therefore with a real strength of mind or true fortitude that she awaited the catastrophe; but a sentiment of vindictiveness having superseded all her former affection, her health and spirits both suffered under the

influence of the troubled, uneasy, and restless condition of her mind.

But to resume the thread of my narrative. I was seated, I say, with my mistress in the parlour when Mr. Appleton returned between nine and ten o'clock after his interview with Wilson. I rose to leave the room as he made his appearance; but he motioned me to resume my seat, saying, "There are no secrets from you, Mary—at least in this business."

He then proceeded to explain all that John Wilson had been telling him; and he concluded by remarking, "I firmly expected to find the self-styled Count here on my return. It is a wonder he has not come back. However, we now know that he is at Canterbury, and I suppose we shall see him to-morrow. It is pretty clear that whatever his hopes were in London about raising money, he has been disappointed."

I soon withdrew to the nursery, leaving Mr. Appleton and my mistress to converse upon the sole topic which could possibly engage their attention; and on retiring to rest, I could not help saying to myself, "It will be a wonder if by this time to-morrow strange things have not taken place at the Willow House." I could not sleep much that night: for knowing everything that was passing, I felt as it were too much mixed up in the whole affair not to be agitated and excited thereby. Besides, although on the one hand I experienced the profoundest sympathy for my mistress and the children, yet on the other hand I could not help feeling some satisfaction to think that so vile and unprincipled an adventurer as her husband was about to be unmasked.

The morning which dawned upon that all but sleepless night, was one of the most cheerless, wretched, and miserable in its aspect that I ever remembered. There was a bitter cold easterly wind; and the sleet was falling like a mist. In spite of warm fires everthing looked dull and miserable within the house; and the prospect without was dismal and dreary to a degree. It was about a couple of hours after breakfast—that is to say, eleven o'clock—when the lady's-maid came up and said, "Mary, you are wanted down in the parlour. Her ladyship says it is about that work you are doing for her; and I am going to stay up with the children."

I accordingly hastened down stairs, expecting to hear that something new had transpired; but such was not the case. My mistress, who seemed very pale and ill, was half-reclining on the sofa: while Mr. Appleton was looking out of the window, either at the dreariness of the weather, or else perhaps in expectation of the Count's arrival.

"Mary," he said, turning towards me the instant I entered the room, "your mistress is so nervous and low-spirited this morning, that I thought it best for you to come down and stay with her a little. And indeed, apart from all other circumstances, it is a day dull enough to damp the happiest spirits—let alone its effect upon drooping ones."

"Take your work, Mary, and sit down near me," said the Countess. "I am really glad to have you with me."

"Here comes somebody!" at this moment exclaimed Mr. Appleton. "Hum! a foreigner too, I should say, by the look of him. Handsome cloak—comical kind of hat, with pinched-up brims——Ah! and there is a fellow just like the 'boots' or porter of an hotel, that has come with him as far as the gate—I dare say to show him the way. I should not wonder if this visit is somehow or another connected with present affairs—you know what I mean."

A loud knock at the front door at this moment resounded through the house; and James speedily entered the parlour, saying, "A French gentleman from Paris wishes to see Mr. Appleton."

"Hum!" ejaculated this gentleman, evidently struck with the same idea which at the moment presented itself to my mind also. "Show him in:"—then as James retreated into the hall to escort the visitor whom he had left there, Mr. Appleton said in a hasty whisper, "Depend upon it, this is some one from the Prefect of Police."

Such was my conjecture: and the same idea had also struck my mistress, as I perceived by the look of assent which she gave in reply to her uncle's observation. I rose to leave the room: but the Countess impatiently motioned for me to resume my seat—and I did so. The next instant the visitor entered the apartment, bowing most politely as he crossed the threshold. He was a middle-aged man—very handsomely dressed—and had a look at once resolute and thoughtful.

"Mr. Appleton?" he said, in an inquiring tone, as he addressed himself to that gentleman: and here I may as well observe that the visitor spoke English with considerable fluency.

"My name is Appleton. Pray sit down, sir. Come near the fire."

"You have written to the Prefect of Police," said the French gentleman, as he took the chair indicated by Mr. Appleton; "and he has sent me over to communicate personally with you. But had we not better converse alone?"

"Hum! I know not exactly what to say——"

"No," immediately interjected the Countess, nervously and anxiously: "there are no secrets. You had better explain, uncle, to this gentleman who I am."

"This lady," Mr. Appleton accordingly observed to the Frenchman, "is my niece—the lady, in fact, whom I described in my letter to the Prefect of of Police, as——as——"

"I understand you, sir," interrupted the Frenchman. "And now, since no farther preliminaries are necessary, I will at once proceed with the communications I have to make. The Prefect of Police duly received your letter of inquiry concerning a Frenchman who calls himself the Count de Montville, and whom you represented to have married your niece—this lady now present—with the assurance that he was a man of large estates and of the highest respectability. You likewise sent a full and minute description of the individual thus alluded to. I must inform you, sir, that I am chief of the Office of the secret Police of Paris; and to me did the Prefect entrust the task of making the investigations you required. I at once felt assured that I knew something of the man, but could not at the first moment discover the particular portfolio of papers referring to him. I therefore sent you an official letter in the name of the Prefect, stating that you should speedily receive a communication upon the subject."

"Which letter came to hand three days ago," observed Mr. Appleton: "and I thank you for such prompt attention."

"The very day on which that letter was despatched," resumed the French official, "I discovered the portfolio that I required; and finding the circumstances connected with the individual in question to be of so much more grave a character than I had at first imagined,—and it happening, too, at the moment, that I wished to visit England upon some private business of my own,—I thought it better to come and communicate with you personally, than entrust what I had to say to a letter."

Mr. Appleton made due acknowledgments for this kindness and consideration on the part of the Frenchman; and I could perceive that my mistress was devoured with a feverish anxiety to hear what was coming. My own curiosity was likewise great: for the official of the Prefect had spoken in terms which promised startling revelations.

"Madam," said the Frenchman, again seeming to hesitate whether he should proceed, "it is my duty to warn you that the tale I have to tell is one too well calculated to give you a serious shock."

"I am nerved, sir," replied my mistress, suddenly assuming a look of composure by means of a great and visible effort.

"Well then, madam, if you are resolved to listen," continued the Frenchman, "it is my duty to proceed. The real name of the person calling himself the Count de Montville is *Charles Leroux*. He first became known to the police of Paris about fifteen years ago. He was then a gay, dashing, dissipated young man, the son of a French merchant who had been compelled to emigrate during the Empire in consequence of being engaged in royalist conspiracies against Napoleon Bonaparte. Having been educated in England, Charles Leroux spoke the English language with much fluency. He inherited but a very moderate fortune from his father; and this he dissipated amongst the most profligate

young men and in the gaming-houses of Paris. When all his legitimate resources were gone, he began to live upon his wits; and a case of cheating at cards in which he was engaged, and which was of a very flagrant character, brought him in contact with the authorities at the time I have mentioned—namely, fifteen years ago. For that offence he was condemned to four months' imprisonment in the criminal gaol of Paris: and there I have every reason to believe he formed the acquaintance of the very desperate men who subsequently led him into his most serious and ignominious dilemma. For not many months after he was released from prison, he was arrested on a charge of having forged several bills of exchange upon some of the most eminent merchants of Paris. He had five or six accomplices in this transaction—those whom I have already alluded to as being the acquaintances he had formed in prison. He and his accomplices were placed upon their trial—their guilt was fully brought home to them—and they were condemned to the galleys for ten years; but previously to be exposed for two hours in the pillory, and be——"

At this instant a post-chaise drove rapidly up to the gate of the grounds in front of the Willow House.

"Here he is!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton. "Now, my dear sir," he hastily went on to say, addressing himself to the French official, "I just want to see to what an extent the impudence of this scoundrel will go, and how he will account for his absence. Besides, I have another person waiting in the town to be confronted with him. Will you have the kindness to step into another room for the present, until I summon you hither? Where shall we put the gentleman, my dear?"

"Mary, take him up to the back drawing-room," said the Countess, upon whose features I observed a malignant and vindictive smile of satisfaction at the thought that the moment of retribution was so near at hand.

"Yes—up into the back drawing-room," cried Mr. Appleton, who was now all in a bustle; "and you shall tell us the rest of the tale, sir, in the scoundrel's presence anon. I will send off the gardener's boy at once to fetch up John Wilson. By the bye, that chaise will have to go back to Ashford ere returning to Canterbury; and I will tell the boy to get a lift on the way. It will save a good quarter of an hour."

According to Mr. Appleton's instructions, I conducted the French gentleman up into the back drawing-room; and as the fire happened to be ready laid, I speedily lighted it. On issuing forth again, I was about to ascend to the nursery, when I heard Mr. Appleton calling me from the bottom of the stairs. I accordingly hastened down; and he said in a rapid whisper, "I have told the gardener's boy—and he is off. Now you must come back and remain with your mistress. No objections! I insist upon it. You shall have an opportunity of seeing the thing to the end. Leave it to me to manage some excuse to keep you in the room when *he* is there."

Thus speaking, Mr. Appleton seized me by the wrist and forced me to accompany him into the parlour, entirely against my inclination: but I was so confused and bewildered by this proceeding on his part, that I could not offer any effectual resistance. I however saw that my mistress desired me to be with her; and I therefore submitted to the necessity of the case, taking up my work so as to appear busy therewith.

Scarcely was all this done, when the Count, having alighted from the post-chaise and paid the postilion, came hurriedly up the gravel walk; and the front-door being opened by James, the news of his arrival having at once spread through the house, he entered the hall. There he immediately said, "Well, James, all well at home?"

"Not exactly, my lord. Her ladyship is rather unwell——"

"Ah! nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh! no, my lord."

"Anything new, James?"

"Nothing particular, my lord—only Mr. Appleton has come."

"Mr. Appleton—eh! and when did he arrive?"

"The day after your lordship's departure."

"Oh, indeed!"—and the ejaculation was evidently made with a pettishness which could not be concealed.

Mr. Appleton had left the parlour-door ajar, when dragging me into the room as already described; and therefore the little colloquy between the Count and James reached our ears plainly enough. Mr. Appleton had seated himself in the arm-chair with that same grave and magisterial demeanour which he had worn on the evening when he questioned me about John Wilson's letter. I glanced at my mistress, and perceived that she had assumed a wonderful degree of outward composure as she sat half-reclining upon the sofa. Everything portended a scene; and I can assure the reader that my own feelings and sensations were unpleasant enough.

Having put off his hat and cloak in the hall, and rubbed his boots upon the mat, while exchanging those brief remarks with the footman, the Count de Montville (as he had chosen to denominate himself) now entered the parlour. I did not dare look up: but I knew that he suddenly stopped short for an instant, doubtless upon beholding something suspicious in Mr. Appleton's demeanour—for a guilty conscience is always keenly sensitive to even the most trivial cause of alarm. But instantly advancing with a kind of rush, he cried, "Well, my angel! my darling! how glad I am to see you again!"

My mistress did not rise from the sofa—nor did she utter a word: but she allowed him to throw his arms about her neck and kiss her with every appearance of enthusiastic affection. He was evidently alarmed and surprised at her manner: for having vainly endeavoured during the first few moments of that embrace to evoke reciprocal endearments from her, he exclaimed, "Why, what is the matter? are you not glad to see me?"

"I have been ill—very ill," answered my mistress, in a voice and manner that were in reality cold, but which might also be taken for the languor of serious indisposition.

And at this idea the Count evidently clutched with avidity: for he said, in a soothing, coaxing, cajoling way, "Yes, you do not look well: and James told me you had been indisposed. But we shall soon have you better, my angel:"—then turning to Mr. Appleton, he extended his hand, saying, "Most welcome, sir, to the Willow House."

"Hum!" returned the old gentleman, without moving from his seat, and merely allowing the Count to clutch his forefinger. "I am glad you have come back; for I ran down from London on purpose to see you. Well, and what news have you brought us from the Continent?"

"When we are alone, I will tell you," said the Count, fixing his eyes upon me.

"Oh! let Mary stay?" my mistress hastened to observe. "She is a very good girl, and has been a great comfort to me during your absence. Besides," added the Countess, with a peculiar smile, "I have made her a sort of confidant; and so there is nothing we can talk about that may not be said in her presence."

"Yes—Mary is a very good girl; and I am highly pleased with her," remarked Mr. Appleton. "She is devoted to her mistress, and fond of the children. So let her stay."

The Count looked irresolute and confused. It was evident he saw there was something wrong;—but of course he knew not what was amiss, nor to what extent. He glanced suspiciously and hastily from his wife to Mr. Appleton—then back again to his wife. She was cold; the uncle was formal and stately. There was a silence of nearly a minute—a long period for such silence to last under circumstances so awkward and embarrassing.

"Well, my lord," said Mr. Appleton, at length breaking that awful pause, "what news, I again ask, have you brought? You may readily suppose that we are all impatient to hear the success of your journey to Paris."

"But do you wish me to speak in the presence of your servant?" asked the Count, now fixing his eyes keenly upon his wife, as if to penetrate all that was passing in her mind.

"Yes—to be sure. Why not?" returned the lady. "Mary is a companion to me; and I wish her to be here. Besides, as it is scarcely possible you can have anything but good tidings to impart, where is the harm in Mary's hearing them?"

But I felt myself very uncomfortable at thus being made the object of so much discussion, and flung upon my mistress an imploring look that she would permit me to leave the room. I even half rose from my seat for the purpose: but with an impatient gesture she waved me back again, and enjoined me to remain. While addressing her husband there had been a slight tinge of sarcasm in her tone—but so slight that it would not have been perceptible under ordinary circumstances. He however, with the keen sensitiveness of a guilty conscience, could not possibly fail to perceive it; and he grew more nervous, more uneasy, and more agitated—while his looks, habitually restless, now wandered with more than usual rapidity about the room, as if in search of something cheering and encouraging. All this while he had not sat down, but remained standing on the hearth-rug in front of the fire, balancing himself against the mantel.

"Well, my *lord*," said Mr. Appleton, accentuating the title of nobility, and giving a short dubious cough, "you are a long time entering upon the particulars of your trip to Paris. Was the French capital very gay?"

"Yes—tolerably so," replied the Count, nervously playing with his moustache.

"And of course your lordship saw all your old acquaintances," continued Mr. Appleton,—"Princes, Dukes, Marquises, Counts, Barons, and so on?"

"I had very little time to see any one," answered the Count. "But really, Mr. Appleton, there seems to be something strange in your manner——"

"Hum! strange! why so?" demanded the old gentleman. "But if I appear to be at all out of spirits, you can very soon put me into the best possible humour by proving that your visit to Paris has brought those rascally agents of your's to book. Have they cashed up, my lord?"

"Well—not exactly; but——"

"But what? Do they mean to pay?"

"Oh! beyond all doubt—and very shortly."

"Hum! very shortly! That's vague and indefinite enough. But what on earth is the reason they do not pay you over the monies that are your due? Come, speak candidly—is there any little encumbrance on your estates in France? for if I saw my way clear, of course I should not mind advancing the money to pay it off."

"Well—to tell you the truth, Mr. Appleton," answered the Count, his features slightly brightening up as if with a glimmering of hope, "there *is* something of that kind. You see, I have trusted too much to my agents——"

"Ah, I understand! and they have been playing the deuce with the property? Perhaps one of them has run away—another is bankrupt—and so on?"

"No, no—things are not quite so bad as that," exclaimed the Count, affecting a jocular laugh: for it was evident that he was again enduring the keenest misgivings.

"Hum! do tell us then precisely how matters stand:"—and Mr. Appleton looked more solemn and serious than any Lord Mayor when about to deliver judgment on an incorrigible beggar.

"Why don't you tell my uncle candidly at once how you stand, Victor?" asked the Countess.

"Oh! you *must* know," cried her husband petulantly, "that it is very disagreeable for me to have to be questioned and catechised in this manner before a servant."

"I am sure," my mistress hastened to reply, as I again made a motion to leave my chair and quit the room, "poor Mary here is only thinking of her work and not troubling herself about what you are saying. However, permit me as your wife to put one or two straightforward questions, and to which I expect straightforward answers. Have you brought over any funds with you?"

"No. But—in a short time——"

"Surely," interrupted the Countess, "with such immense estates and revenues, you could have obtained a few thousands in advance?"

"I will tell you all about it when we are alone," exclaimed the Count: then assuming a haughty and insolent air, he added in a tone of defiance, "I will not be cross-questioned in this manner!"

"Hum!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton. "You need not be angry about it."

"Oh, not at all!" said the Count: and walking to the window, he affected to be looking out at the weather.

"Did you see the Duke de Montmorency while you were in Paris?" asked the Countess: "or that tailor—you remember whom I mean—who sent you a cheque, you know, on one occasion for ten thousand pounds?"

"Ah! what was that?" exclaimed Mr. Appleton.

"Oh! an excellent anecdote," exclaimed the Countess, with a most malicious smile. "Do tell it to uncle, Victor. You remember—don't you?—the tailor who sent you that cheque,—requesting you would order a coat of him; and you returned the draft——Oh! no, you bade your valet take it back and give the insolent fellow a good caning to teach him better manners in future."

"Hum! I wish that his lordship had only fallen in with such a complaccut tailor on this last trip of his to Paris: he would not have come back empty-handed. But do tell me, when are your remittances to arrive from Paris? or would you like me to take a run over and urge on these dilatory agents of your's?"

"I will thank you, sir, to mind your own business," answered the Count, turning abruptly away from the window: and by the hasty glance which I threw at his countenance, I saw that he was as ghastly pale as on that night when I had beheld him in the passage just wakened up from his somnambulism.

"Hum! this is a pretty way to treat an uncle," said Mr. Appleton, "who takes your interest so much at heart,"

"Victor, I am ashamed of you," said the Countess, "to speak thus to Mr. Appleton."

"It is clear to me," replied her husband, "that some one has been prejudicing you both against me during my absence. So the best thing I can do is to retire to another room; and when you, madam," he added, with a fierce look at his wife, "choose to come and confer with me in a proper manner, I shall be prepared to give you every explanation."

With these words the Count stalked out of the parlour, closing the door somewhat violently behind him.

"Hum! he smells a rat," said Mr. Appleton.

"And yet he is very far from suspecting to what extent our knowledge of him goes," added the Countess. "He fancies that our suspicions are merely excited——Perhaps he also has confidence in my love, and thinks that when we are alone together he can coax and cajole me as heretofore, and appease me with some ridiculous tale. But he is mistaken—bitterly, bitterly mistaken!" she went on to say, her fine eyes flashing fire. "I have loved him but too well—I have been credulous even to folly—oh! it has been an infatuation, a madness, an enchantment: but I have awakened from the dream—and now the sooner the catastrophe comes the better."

"Wilson cannot be much longer ere he makes his appearance," said Mr. Appleton, looking at his watch. "The post-chaise would not be more than ten minutes getting into Ashford—it's only a mile—and Wilson would not be a quarter of an hour coming hither. We may therefore expect him in a few minutes."

"But what if the wretch," cried the Countess, thus mercilessly alluding to her husband, "should go into the back drawing-room and find the Frenchman there?"

"Well then," rejoined Mr. Appleton, "the catastrophe, as you call it, would only be accelerated by a few minutes, and we should lose the satisfaction of witnessing its effect."

I now availed myself of the opportunity of a pause to beg and beseech that I might be allowed to retire; for the preceding scene with the sham Count had been too painful for me to wish to stand the chance of beholding the repetition or continuance of it. But my mistress earnestly requested that I would consent to remain. I was however still proffering my entreaties to the contrary, when Mr. Appleton, who in the meantime had risen from his chair and approached the window, suddenly exclaimed, "There's Wilson! I just saw him with the gardener's boy passing round to the back of the house. Now, leave me to arrange the rest:"—and he hurried from the room.

"Pray let me withdraw," said I when alone with my mistress.

"Mary," she answered, with a voice and look that were both deeply sombre, "the presence of one of my own sex is necessary to sustain me. I feel that it is so—and I beg that you will remain. When this ordeal has passed I may experience a reaction of sentiments and emotions; and then I must have you near me. But perhaps you think me very cruel and hard-hearted to be thus vindictive towards my husband? The wretch! how can I think of him as a husband? Has he not treated me vilely—infamously? O God! to think that I should have had a galley-slave in my arms!"—and for a moment she wrung her hands bitterly: but suddenly resuming a strange and unnatural degree of fortitude, she went on to say in a low deep voice, "Yes, I do long to be revenged against one who has practised such heartless cruelty—such abhorrent treachery! Has he not plundered me of all I possess—reducing me and my children to a state of dependence upon my worthy uncle? And if it were not for that uncle, what would become of us? should we not be beggars upon the face of the earth? Oh, Mary! the heart that can love the fondest, is also that which can hate the most bitterly!"

At this instant Mr. Appleton returned to the room; and closing the door, he said, "It's all right. I have taken Wilson up to the back drawing-room, and left him there with the Frenchman. It is an understood thing that when I ring this bell violently James is to run upand bring them both down hither."

"Heavens, uncle! have you let James into the secret?" cried the Countess. "I thought we were to save all exposure before the household?"

"Don't be afraid, my dear," interrupted Mr. Appleton. "I have committed no oversight. Of course the servants suspect that something strange is going on: but they need not know what—nor why so much mystery is observed about that Frenchman and Wilson. The Count has gone to his room; and I have sent Septimus up with a polite message, as if coming from you, my dear, to beg that he will step down again as soon as convenient. He will think it a sort of peace-proposal, and will not fail to come."

While thus speaking, Mr. Appleton resumed his arm-chair and also his grave magisterial demeanour. In less than a minute the door opened, and the Count made his appearance.

"Well, my love," he said, with a quick glance around; and I saw that he was abashed and that his hopefulness was damped by perceiving us all three in the same position as before: but still he endeavoured to put as good a face upon the matter as possible;—"well, my love, are you in a better temper now?"

"It all depends upon you, Victor, to put me in a good humour," was his wife's response.

"Come and sit down with us," said Mr. Appleton, "and let us see if we cannot resume the conversation in a more satisfactory manner."

The Count, evidently at a loss to know what to think, but doubtless buoying himself up with the hope that matters might yet be mended, or at least patched up for the present, placed himself on the sofa where his wife was half-reclining, while Mr. Appleton wheeled his arm-chair up to the table where writing-materials were spread.

"Hum!" said the old gentleman; "a wretched bad pen! But I must manage with it. Now, my lord, how much is the mortgage on your estates?"

"How much? Oh—a mere trifle!"

"Well, but how much? I must know before I agree to advance the money to pay it off. Is it ten thousand pounds?"

"That's the exact sum, my dear sir," quickly answered the Count, his features brightening up considerably.

"Well then—ten thousand pounds," repeated Mr. Appleton, as he wrote the amount upon a piece of paper. "And now, where *are* your estates?"

"Where? Oh, in the neighbourhood of Paris," replied the Count, still more eagerly and still more joyfully.

"Good! The Montville estates, I suppose? for all you French noblemen derive your titles from your landed possessions."

"Yes—generally so," said the Count, complacently twirling his moustache: for he evidently thought that things had taken a turn in his favour, and that the old gentleman intended to advance the sum mentioned.

"Well, and if I lend you this money," said Mr. Appleton, "when do you think you could repay me?"

"Oh! very soon indeed—very soon! My agents are sure to make me remittances in a month or six weeks."

"Shall we say six weeks?" asked Mr. Appleton, with all the air of one who was seriously entertaining a business transaction.

"That will suit me admirably," replied the Count, now looking as if he were on a perfect bed of roses.

"Good! six weeks," continued Mr. Appleton. "And if I write a cheque on my London bankers, which you can send through the Ashford one, you will give me your promissory note at forty-two days for the amount?"

"Certainly—everything in the regular way. Now, this is the proper manner to conduct family affairs of such a delicate kind."

"Hum! and we might have managed it all pleasantly enough just now," said Mr. Appleton, "if you had not taken such queer humours into your head, telling me to mind my own business."

"Forgive me, my dear sir," exclaimed the Count, as if with an effusion of penitence and regret; "but I thought I was being cross-examined in an unbecoming manner. And then, too, I feared that you, my angel," he added, turning to his wife, "were somehow or another offended with me; and *that* was a belief that I could not bear."

"Come, come, let us finish off this business," said Mr. Appleton, who had been scribbling something on a slip of paper. "Here, I have drawn up a note of hand for you to sign. I can easily get it stamped when I go back to London."

The Count jumped up from the sofa with all the elasticity inspired by a mind suddenly relieved from the torture of vague misgivings; and his features were now positively radiant.

"Give me the pen and I will sign the note," he said. "Ah! ah! ah! see what it is to have a rich uncle. Of course you have added the interest, my dear sir?"

"Hum! I forgot the interest," rejoined Mr. Appleton, with a very business-like seriousness of aspect. "But never mind! The principal is the chief thing; so the interest may be left out of the question. Here is the pen:"—and as he handed it to the Count he rose from his seat.

"Where am I to sign?" inquired the adventurer, literally trembling with the excitement of joy at this apparent piece of good luck.

"Stop! One moment!" ejaculated Mr. Appleton. "As this is a large transaction we ought to have witnesses to it:"—and he rang the bell violently.

The Count suddenly looked distured, and his eyes were cast searchingly upon the old gentleman: but not a muscle of his magisterial-looking countenance moved at that moment. My mistress dropped her pocket-handkerchief for the purpose of having an opportunity of stooping while she picked it up, so as to conceal whatever emotions at the instant were reflected in her countenance.

"Witnesses?" said the unprincipled adventurer, with increasing agitation and trouble: "what witnesses?"

"Oh! I have them ready at hand," replied Mr. Appleton. "And here they are!"

The door burst open at the moment: but no language can describe the agony which was expressed in the sort of half-yell—half-shriek which burst from the lips of the miserable Count, as he at once recognized not only John Wilson, but also the French-police official. He started as if suddenly pierced with a dagger, and then staggered back towards the mantel-piece, where he leant gazing wildly and agonizingly upon the two individuals who had thus simultaneously made their appearance. It was a scene all the painful horror of which has often and often risen up to my mind during the years that have elapsed since it took place.

"Charles Leroux—Count de Montville—Prince de Chantilly—and heaven alone knows how many other names you have borne," said the French police official, in a stern voice, and speaking in English, as he advanced towards the miserable man whom he thus addressed,—"you are thoroughly unmasked! Sir," he continued, turning towards Mr. Appleton, "I had not time ere now to finish the tale that I had commenced: but there is one little particular which may be added in a few words. Not only was that unprincipled adventurer condemned to ten years at the galleys, but also——"

"No, no! enough, enough!" yelled forth the miserable man, actually writhing and convulsing like a stricken snake. "Say no more! spare me! I will go hence!"

"Silence!" exclaimed the French official, in a tone of such stern authority that Charles Leroux

became paralyzed as it were with terror. "You must be thoroughly unmasked. Know then, sir," he continued, again speaking to Mr. Appleton,—"and you too, unhappy lady," addressing my mistress, "that this wretch is a branded felon, and the mark of the public executioner's searing-iron is upon his shoulder!"

A half-stifled shriek escaped from the lips of my mistress at this horrible announcement; and she covered her face with her hands as she fell back upon the sofa. A thrill of ineffable horror had swept through my entire form, leaving behind a sickening sensation at the heart.

"Monster!" exclaimed Mr. Appleton, becoming purple with rage. "Begone—begone from our presence!"

Charles Leroux waited not for compulsory means to be taken to eject him from the mansion. With most horrible workings of the countenance, and looking indeed like a man who was about to be borne to the place of execution, he staggered from the room. A solemn silence prevailed in the parlour until we heard the front door open and shut, and beheld the unprincipled adventurer pass rapidly through the grounds towards the gate.

"Now I seem to breathe more freely," said my mistress, with a long deep gasp; and as she removed her hands from her countenance, her face was pale as death and her features were distorted.

"After all this excitement," hastily whispered Mr. Appleton to his niece, "you had better go up to your room, while I have a few minutes' conversation with these persons. Go with your mistress, Mary."

The unfortunate lady complied with her uncle's suggestion; and I followed her up to her own chamber,—on reaching which she threw herself upon the bed, and burying her face in the pillows, gave full vent to the violence of those varied feelings which had remained pent up throughout this memorable morning. It was some time before she became calm enough to converse: but when she so far regained her composure, she addressed me in the following words:—

"It is my intention to leave this house within an hour. The children will of course go with me. My uncle has offered us a home at his residence in London. He will not however accompany me to-day, but will remain here to pay off all the servants, sell the furniture, and make arrangements for cancelling the lease of the Willow House? Will you go with me, Mary? I do not wish to part with you. On the contrary, it would grieve me greatly if you do not assent to my proposal."

"Madam," I answered—for of course I no longer gave her the false title of *ladyship*,—"I return you my grateful thanks for this and all other proofs of kindness which I have received at your hands. But for the present it is my desire to remain at Ashford."

I felt that I was blushing as I spoke; and the reader, who knows full well wherefore I chose to stay in my native place, requires not to be informed why the colour thus mounted to my cheeks. But my mistress was too much pre-occupied with her own affairs to notice it. She however pressed me to alter my mind and remain in her service: but with renewed thanks, I assured her of my unalterable determination to continue for the present at Ashford. She therefore decided upon retaining her lady's-maid to take care of the children.

An hour afterwards a post-chaise, which had been ordered from Ashford, drove up to the gate to take my mistress, the maid, and the children as far as Canterbury: for she would not think of using the carriage for that purpose, as all the equipages were to be disposed of, together with every other proof of the sham Count's career of extravagance. To be brief, I bade my mistress farewell, and affectionately kissed the children: the post-chaise then drove away, the lady's-maid being the only servant of the household who accompanied the family.

As the reader may suppose, great was the surprise and consternation which prevailed amongst the domestics who remained behind, at the abruptness of this departure,—their master going one way, and their mistress with the children another. That something most disagreeable had occurred, they of course suspected: but the full extent of the ignominious catastrophe they were very far from conjecturing. Indeed, they thought it was a break-up for want of funds; and the outside of their suspicion was that the Count must be a mere adventurer who had taken in his wife and dissipated all her property. Of course I did not enlighten them on those points of which they were ignorant.

Mr. Appleton made John Wilson a handsome present, on condition that he should immediately betake himself away from the neighbourhood; and in order to ensure the man's prompt departure and allow no time for gossipping in Ashford, Mr. Appleton gave him a cheque that was payable only in London. I need scarcely observe that Wilson was in too great haste to receive the amount not to obey the liberal donor's injunctions, and make the best of his way from the vicinity of the Willow House.

From the French police-official Mr. Appleton heard the remainder of the history of Charles Leroux. This individual, after having passed ten years at the galleys, availed himself of his handsome person, good education, and fascinating manners, to live upon the credulity of those on whom such adventurers ever manage to prey; and infinite were the trickeries, swindles, and rascalities which he had perpetrated and which had come to the knowledge of the French police. Mr. Appleton not merely thanked the Prefect's emissary for the attention he had shown him in the matter, but likewise insisted upon paying all his travelling expenses—which he did with the utmost liberality.

In a similarly generous spirit did he remunerate the servants of the household, whom he now discharged; so that they were handsomely recompensed for the sudden loss of their situations. On the following day an upholsterer arrived from Canterbury, to whom Mr. Appleton at once disposed of all the furniture. The carriages and horses were sold to another individual; and the proprietor of the Willow House was induced by a handsome *bonus* to cancel the lease. Thus, in the course of two or three days, the whole of that splendid establishment was broken up,—all the materials of luxury and the appliances of ostentation and grandeur melting away as if they had never been.

When every one of these arrangements were

carried into effect and Mr. Appleton was ready to enter a post-chaise to bear him to Canterbury on his return to London, he said to me, "I am sorry, Mary, that you did not consent to remain in my niece's service: but I have no doubt you had very excellent reasons for declining, as you are a prudent and good girl, incapable of acting whimsically and without motive. I remember that the first morning I was here," he continued with a smile, "you refused to take any money from me; and I admired you for it—because you knew nothing of me at the time. But circumstances have transpired most painfully to make us friends. Yes—I use the word *friends* purposely: and it is as a friend, Mary, that I offer you this purse containing fifty sovereigns. As a friend you must take it; and should you ever stand in need of honest advice or pecuniary assistance, do not hesitate to apply to me. Here is my card, with my address in London. Now don't be a foolish girl: you *must* take this little testimonial of my good opinion."

The worthy gentleman forced me to accept his bounty, for which I returned my most grateful acknowledgments.

"I do not insult you, Mary," he went on to say, "by asking you to keep secret all the unpleasant things that have happened here, and that have come to your knowledge. You know everything. I have purposely made you a confidante, because you are discreet and prudent. You may however write to your friend, Lady Harlesdon's maid, and tell her that her false Prince has been bitterly punished at last. And now good bye."

Mr. Appleton shook me cordially by the hand—and we parted.

Ere I close this chapter I must make a few observations relative to the unprincipled adventurer who had been so thoroughly unmasked. The process of branding, as the police-agent had explained it to Mr. Appleton, from whose lips I subsequently received the particulars, was a fearful one. Charles Leroux and his accomplices in the crime of forgery, for which they were condemned, suffered that indelible infamy. After having been exposed for two hours on a high platform in the middle of one of the public squares of Paris, they were each marked upon the shoulder with a red-hot iron, which thus seared the two letters T.F.* upon the flesh, leaving those letters imprinted there for ever in deep red hues. No wonder was it that the remembrance of that horrible punishment should haunt the miserable man even in his dreams: no wonder that it should excite his mind to such a feverish degree that he would rise from his couch and walk about in his sleep, giving vent to the deep anguish of his soul in moans and lamentations; and no wonder was it that if suddenly startled into wakefulness, his first instinctive motion should be to raise his hand to the branded shoulder in order to convince himself that it was not exposed to view! The circumstance of those indelible marks being upon his flesh, likewise accounted for the scrupulous exclusion of Septimus from his dressing-room whenever he was performing his toilet: nor less was it easy to imagine that he would carefully abstain from the excitement of liquor, the influence of which was but too well calculated to produce those fits of somnambulism in some unlucky moment of which a horrible exposure might take place. As for the coarseness of his hands, that was accounted for by ten years of hard labour at the galleys; while the habitual restlessness of his looks, and the nervousness of his manner when doors opened suddenly or the visit of a stranger was announced, were but natural enough on the part of one whose life was passed in the constant apprehension of detection and exposure.

* *Travaux Forcés*—literally "compulsory labour" but which may be translated as "the galleys."

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE FIRST OF NOVEMBER.

When I left the Willow House it wanted but a very few days to the first of November—the memorable one on which I was either to see Eustace Quentin or to receive a letter from him. I returned to the same lodging which I had occupied with my two sisters at the house of the widow woman previous to my entrance into the service of the self-styled Count and Countess de Montville; and I took little Jane from Mr. Collins to be my companion so long as I might remain there.

Throughout all those chapters which have intervened since the one which chronicles my interview with Eustace Quentin, when he declared his affection for me, I have avoided as much as possible breaking the thread of my narrative to state how often his image rose up into my mind, and with what feelings of painful pleasure and fearful hope I was wont to look forward to this first of November which was now at hand. But I am neither so weak-minded in one sense nor do I profess to be so strong-minded in another, as to pretend that I did not often and often fall into a reverie by day and lay awake by night, wondering what the memorable first of November would bring forth. I have already frankly avowed to the reader that I loved Eustace Quentin: I may add that I loved him tenderly—devotedly. Indeed, I felt that this love of mine was so interwoven as it were with the very fibres of my existence, that all my hopes of happiness in this world depended upon the result.

The reader will recollect that, when at Captain Calder's, I had ascertained that the Hon. Mr. Quentin's regiment had been ordered to the North of Ireland before the occurrence of those incidents in Derbyshire which had for the time tended so materially to compromise my reputation in respect to Sir Aubrey Clavering. On several occasions since that period I had obtained a peep at an *Army List*, both at the circulating library at Derby and at that of Ashford, in order to ascertain whether his regiment was still quartered in the same place; and I had found that it was. I had also perceived that he continued to belong to it, his name figuring amongst the list of Lieutenants. Will the reader blame me for these little instances of curiosity? I think not. They were the evidence of a love which I have not hesitated to avow, and of which I could not be ashamed,—a love, too, which I have already said must exercise a most material influence upon the happiness or misery of the remainder of my life.

Love is the rose of all the flowers of the soul: but it is a rose with thorns! It has its poignant

fears as well as its exultant hopes: it has its pain as well as its pleasure. And so it was with me. Not that I experienced the slightest apprehension of Eustace Quentin's fidelity: I was convinced that he would continue to love me, if he believed me worthy of his affection. Ah! but *there* existed the doubt; and in that doubt were centred the apprehensions, the fears, and the pains of my love! What if the breath of scandal had wafted even to the North of Ireland the tale of my supposed impropriety with Sir Aubrey Clavering?—what if Lady Harlesdon herself, when jealous and bitter against me, had written the calumny to her cousin (though unconscious of my engagement with him) and had since neglected to contradict it?—or what if Sir Aubrey Clavering himself, through vindictive rage against me, had contrived that the atrocious misrepresentations should become known to his rival in my heart's affections? This was the fear that had haunted me, and had wrung many bitter sighs from my heart and many scalding tears from my eyes. And if the first of November should pass without either the appearance of Eustace Quentin at Ashford or the receipt of a letter from him, would not that fear be terribly confirmed?

But then, on the other hand, if such were the case, would it not be my duty, in order to clear up my own character, to write to Eustace explaining everything, and even referring him to Lady Harlesdon for the ratification of my tale? Ah! but in doing this, would it not be inevitably necessary to reveal to him the circumstances of Lady Harlesdon's own dishonour? Yes: for otherwise how could I prove that the dressing-up of the Gipsy Queen in the garments of Sir Aubrey Clavering was a vile stratagem, concocted by Lord Harlesdon in order to plunge a dagger into his wife's heart? In short, I could not clear up my own character to Eustace, without exposing to him his cousin Lady Harlesdon's frailty. And would I do this? Alas! alas! I wrung my hands bitterly at the bare thought of being plunged into such a fearful dilemma.

Before I resume the thread of my narrative I must state that during the past few months I had received two letters from Mrs. Calder, dated from the South of France, and informing me that her son Mr. Edward's health was somewhat improving; but that he still retained too vivid an impression of that fatal affection which he had conceived for me, to be enabled to shake off the melancholy that hung upon his soul; and Mrs. Calder hinted as delicately as possible that if it should turn out that my own hopes relative to Eustace Quentin were disappointed, both herself and the Captain would be rejoiced to welcome me as a daughter-in-law. From Mrs. Messiter I had likewise received two or three letters while I was at the Willow House. Her husband was doing a good business again, but was gradually becoming more and more a victim to habits of intemperance; so that the poor woman was still far from happy. Mr. Smithson, it appeared, was still carrying on the game of competition with unmitigated spirit, and was underselling every grocer in the town. He had even hoisted a flag on the top of his house to attract notice to his "Emporium," by which magnificent name he had dubbed his establishment. It likewise appeared that every Saturday evening he had a band of music, consisting of a drum, a fiddle, and a French horn—the man with the drum also playing the mouth-organ or pandean-pipes—stationed in front of his shop as an additional incentive for public patronage. But even this was not all: for he occasionally hired a troop of conjurors to display their antics opposite his window, so that a crowd might be congregated and the opportunity afforded for showering little hand-bills amongst them, calling attention to the cheapness of his articles. In short, Mr. Smithson was becoming a public nuisance in Snargate Street, and was even threatened with an indictment by the authorities: but this storm he cunningly managed to avert by making a donation of five guineas to the Sunday Morning New Light and Evangelical Tract Distribution Society—by which admirable stroke of policy he got the parish clergyman, the churchwardens, and the overseers on his side; so that the flag continued to wave above the house, the band to play on Saturday night, and even the mountebanks to perform their antics without farther threats of molestation.

I will now resume the thread of my narrative. The first of November dawned; and instead of being a dull, misty, cold day, as is usual at that season of the year, the weather was fine, clear, and bright; so that I could not help thinking that the very heaven itself gave me an augury of happiness. I felt cheerful, and less a prey to suspense than I had anticipated. A secret voice seemed to be whispering within my soul that my destiny was not to be altogether one of sorrow and trouble; but that it would be blessed by some bright days. I could not help thinking of the Gipsy Queen's prophecies when exercising her skill in palmistry upon me; and I more than ever wondered how she could possibly have obtained the knowledge that the month of November was to exercise so important an influence over my future happiness or misery. However, not to weary the reader with too long a record of my meditations or reflections, I will proceed to state that a little before nine o'clock in the morning—when I knew the letters would be sorted at the post-office—I bent my way thither, leaving my sister Jane in the care of the woman of the house. While proceeding along the street I felt my heart beginning to palpitate more and more violently; and as I thought of the probability that instead of receiving a letter I might within a few minutes meet Eustace Quentin himself, such a gush of ineffable emotions seemed to swell up into my very throat that I was compelled to pause for a moment and affect to be looking at a print in a picture-shop to avoid attracting the notice of the passers-by. Then, continuing my way, I arrived in a few minutes within sight of the post-office: but the quick glance which I instantaneously threw in that direction, was accompanied by a sudden feeling of disappointment; for Eustace Quentin was *not* waiting in the street to receive me!

Ah! judging by my own sentiments, I thought to myself that if he had come to see me, he would have been there at the very earliest hour: and so I already felt assured that he would not come at all. But then, might there not be a letter? I redoubled my speed—a couple of minutes brought me to the shop where the post-office was kept—and as I opened the door to enter, an ejaculation of joy fell upon my ears. Eustace Quentin was waiting inside to meet me!

For a moment a sort of dizziness came over me, and my head swam round. But when I felt my hand eagerly caught in his own and warmly pressed, I instantaneously recovered my presence of mind; and meeting his looks, expressed by my own the ineffable delight which I experienced at thus encountering him. He led me out of the shop, and making me take his arm, conducted me hurriedly along the street that was nearest to the open country, saying a thousand tender and affectionate things as we proceeded—but still so far subduing any outward manifestation of his feelings as to avoid attracting unpleasant observation.

A few minutes brought us to the extremity of the town; and striking into a lane which diverged from the main road, Eustace then gave free vent to his emotions of pleasure at this meeting.

"Dearest, dearest Mary!" he exclaimed, gazing affectionately upon me, "what a moment of happiness is this! Oh, I knew you would be there—I knew that you would come to keep the appointment! For, on arriving at Ashford last evening, I could not resist making some little private inquiries concerning you; and I learnt that you were in the town. But did you think I should be here to-day?"

"I hoped so," was the answer which I murmuringly gave; and the tears of joy were trickling down my cheeks.

Eustace threw his arms around my neck, and straining me to his breast, kissed me tenderly. For some minutes we had not words to give utterance to the joy that filled our hearts, but walked slowly along, no longer arm-in-arm, but hand-in-hand, gazing fondly upon each other. Eustace showed by his looks that he considered me to be much improved in appearance; while I on my part felt precisely the same with regard to himself. A year had given him a more manly aspect. He was dressed in plain clothes; and methought that never

had I seen so elegant a young gentleman. He was characterized by all the loftiness of high birth without any of its insolent hauteur: his manners were polished to the most exquisite refinement, without the slightest tinge of affectation; and he had an air of the most perfect gentility, without the faintest perceptible shade of dandyism. I am not ashamed to say that altogether he was a being in every way qualified to inspire love and esteem, and retain possession of the heart which he had captivated.

But while I was still gazing upon him—while our eyes, indeed, mutually poured forth the warm transfusion of our blending spirits in the sincerest, the purest, and the holiest affection—I observed a shade gradually come over his classically handsome countenance; and at the same time a sigh, which he vainly endeavoured to keep back, reached my ears. Then did I indeed feel that the rose of love was not without its thorns!

"My beloved Mary," he said, instantaneously perceiving that I had observed this darkling mournfulness which had stolen upon him, "let me at once assure you of my constant fidelity—my deep unalterable attachment towards you. Never, never, dear girl, from the first moment that I opened my heart to you in Derbyshire, have I repented of the step which I then took. No—the thought that I love you, and am beloved by you in return, has ever been the sweetest wish my soul has harboured; and your beautiful image has never been absent from my mind. I will not ask, Mary, whether you have experienced reciprocal feelings: I read the blissful answer in your looks. Ah! my adored girl, how often and often have I taken up my pen and covered whole sheets of paper with the outpourings of my affection. On those occasions I have felt that it was an absolute necessity thus to give vent to the ineffable emotions that were swelling in my soul; and I wrote just as I would have spoken to you, had you been near at the time. But then I recollected your express wish that there should be no correspondence of any kind between us; and though tempted almost beyond the power of resistance to seal up the letters which I had thus written and take them with my own hand to the post, yet I invariably triumphed over these fervid longings to break the spell of silence and communicate with you. Yes, I restrained myself, because you had willed that I should do so! Believe me therefore, Mary, that by thus obeying you, I afforded a far greater proof of the devotedness of my affection than if I had violated our compact and transmitted those letters."

I pressed my lover's hand in acknowledgment of gratitude and tenderness for all that he said,—my heart being too full to allow me to give utterance to my feelings in words.

"You may conceive, dear Mary," he continued, "the admiration with which I read in the newspapers of your heroic conduct at Derby. Oh, how I then longed to hasten to see you—to clasp you in my arms—to tell you all I thought—and to proclaim how undying, how illimitable was my love! But no; I dared not violate the solemn agreement entered into between us. Yet, from a distance, Mary, I beheld you—not with my outward vision it is true—but with my mental sight I beheld you, I say, in all the glory of that heroism which so nobly prompted you to rise from a bed of sickness and repair to a tribunal of justice to save the life of a fellow-creature. And then I thought, not only what an admirable disposition was your's and what an exalted nature you possessed, but likewise how happy I ought to be in owning your love. A secret enemy has endeavoured to prejudice me against you—anonymous letters have reached me, filled with scandal, and designed with the base attempt to alienate my affections from you. But nothing of all *that* had the least weight with me; and as for the vile calumniatory epistles, I indignantly tore them into pieces and trampled them under foot. For I knew, Mary, that you were virtue personified—that you were pure and spotless as the innocent child—and that it was the very rectitude of your principles and the excellence of your conduct that excited those enmities. And for your satisfaction, dearest Mary," continued Eustace, in the softest and most endearing tones, "let me add that from the lips of Lady Harlesdon, the day before yesterday in London, I heard enough to convince me that my confidence in you was not misplaced, but that you are indeed all I believed you to be!"

"Does her ladyship know," I inquired, tremulously, "anything of all that has passed between us?"

"No," replied Eustace: "for until I had seen you this day I regarded our love, our compact, and our engagement, as a secret existing only between ourselves. Besides, though well assured of your fidelity towards one who loves you so devotedly, yet I wished to receive from your lips the blissful avowal that your heart is no way changed towards me."

"Oh! that were impossible!" I answered with effusion: and again did Eustace fling his arms around my neck and lavish the tenderest caresses upon me.

"Now, dearest Mary," he continued, as we resumed our walk hand-in-hand down the lane—and once more did I observe the shade come back upon his countenance,—"I must explain to you exactly how I am situated—next what my hopes and wishes are—and then I must await the decision from your lips. In the first place I must remind you that I am but a second son, and not the heir either to the entailed estates or the title of my father Lord Wilberton. An uncle, who died some years ago, left me a fortune of sixty thousand pounds, to which I had until lately believed myself entitled on attaining my majority; and therefore it had been my fond hope that this day, on which I number my twenty-first year, would have seen me independent—yes, and rich also: in which case it would have been my pride and my happiness to lay that fortune at your feet. But, alas, dear Mary, it now appears that by a clause inserted in that uncle's will, I am not to receive my fortune until the day of my marriage; and then only, provided that such marriage be with the consent of my parents."

Quentin's voice had gradually grown mournful as he went on speaking; but it sank down into complete despondency as he gave utterance to those last words.

"Of this clause in my late uncle's will, I was not aware," he continued, "until about a month ago—when I received a letter from my father Lord Wilberton, reminding me that I was approaching my majority, and directing my attention to that special

proviso relative to my fortune, and with which he evidently fancied that I was already acquainted. Dear Mary, I was at first thunderstruck by the intelligence; and then I burst into tears in the solitude of my chamber. Yes—I wept over my father's letter; for I understood its meaning but too well. That same anonymous coward who had scribbled his foul and wretched libels relative to yourself, had evidently been practising the same course towards my sire and making him acquainted with the affection that I entertained for you. My first impulse was to hurry off and see my father; but I could not at once obtain leave of absence from the Colonel of my regiment. Ten days elapsed ere I was enabled to take my departure; then I hastened to England, and sped up to London. But my father, and mother, and elder brother had just set off for the family seat in Yorkshire. Thither I proceeded; and in a private interview with my father, frankly avowed that my whole life's happiness was centred in the love which I entertained, sweet Mary, for you. Now, be not offended at what I am compelled to state: for you know how deeply-rooted certain prejudices are in the minds of aristocratic personages."

"I understand you, dear Eustace," was my answer, given with more firmness and calmness than I had expected to be able to assume. "Lord Wilberton will not hear of your alliance with a poor humble girl like me; and this I have foreseen from the very first. Indeed, it would have been utter madness to expect the contrary. And now, Eustace, say not another word upon the subject: but let us part——and for ever!"

"O Mary, this from your lips!" he exclaimed with passionate vehemence. "No, no—it is impossible! It would drive me mad to see all hope annihilated. Believe me, sweet girl, I exist only for you. But as you now comprehend my exact position—as you see in me nothing but a poor lieutenant in the army, altogether dependent upon a stern and severe father—you must listen to what I have to propose. Mary, if I possess you, the loss of my fortune is nothing. Indeed, I shall be proud and happy to make the sacrifice of money to that fond and holy love with which you have inspired me. Not for an instant will I deceive you in anything; and therefore in asking you to become my wife, it is my duty to explain that we shall have nothing but my pay to subsist upon: for Lord Wilberton will even withdraw the allowance which he has hitherto made me. Yet there are officers in the army who have nothing beyond their pay, and who are married——"

"Yes—it may be so," I answered: "but this shall not be your case. I know full well that you have been accustomed to every comfort and luxury—that you have your horses and your domestics—that your regiment is an expensive one—and that it is almost an absolute necessity for you to keep up certain appearances. Now, Eustace—though heaven forbid that I should measure love by gold, or believe that the sincerity and purity of the former can be enhanced or depreciated by the amount which one possesses of the latter,—yet not for worlds would I permit you, on account of this love of our's, to sink down into comparative poverty. But tell me, Eustace—was your surmise correct that anonymous letters had been sent to your father?"

"It was so," replied Mr. Quentin: "and I have no doubt that the villain Aubrey Clavering is the author of those scandalous epistles which were sent, in the most fiendish spirit of mischief, alike to me and my parents. But ere I implore you to alter your decision, my dearest Mary," he continued in a voice full of emotion and grief, "let me tell you what transpired after my interview with my father. I did not leave him in anger. I mean that I would not show resentment on my side—but I gave him the solemn and sacred assurance that never, never, would I conduct to the altar any other bride than you, my beloved Mary! I therefore made him understand that if in a too scrupulous feeling, *you* should refuse to become my wife under these circumstances, that my utter unhappiness would be sealed, and that my own parents would be the authors thereof! My father was implacable. I then sought an interview with my mother; and she wept at the words in which I addressed her. To be candid with you, Mary, she advised me to take no precipitate step—but to wait awhile; and if at the expiration of two or three years I still entertained the same sentiments with regard to you, she would then use her influence with Lord Wilberton to move him in our behalf. Nothing more than this could I obtain from my mother; and I regret to say that as for hoping to find an advocate or a champion in my brother Ferdinand, that idea were useless! In the deepest affliction did I leave Wilberton Hall, whence I repaired to London. There, as I have already told you, I saw Lady Harlesdon. She knows not of our engagement: she suspects not how far matters have progressed between us: but she has all along fancied that we were not indifferent to each other. She told me that she had seen you a few days ago at Canterbury; and with a sort of enthusiasm in your favour, she hastened to deplore that the breath of calumny should ever have been raised against a being so pure and so spotless as yourself. To hear her thus speak was balm to my wounded heart; and I must have answered with a somewhat unguarded fervour, for she gazed upon me with an earnestness that was significant enough. Some one however came in at the moment; and we had no farther opportunity to converse relative to you. Yesterday I travelled down to Ashford, where I arrived last evening and took up my quarters at the hotel. Ah! dearest Mary, during the whole of the past night I scarcely closed my eyes! I was tossed as it were upon a troubled sea of mingled hopes and fears—anticipations of pain and pleasure. I resolved to tell you everything. Not for worlds would I deceive you, even in a single detail relative to my exact position. And now once more, my dearest Mary, let me beseech you to yield to my prayer; and if your lips breathe an affirmative, it will be the happiest moment of my life. Oh! perish all the world's honours and riches, rather than that such a love as our's should be doomed to disappointment or despair! For my part, dear Mary, I would sooner inhabit the humblest cottage with you as my bride, than become the tenant of a palace without you."

There was a mingled vehemence and earnestness in the language of Eustace Quentin which made a deep impression upon my heart. Deep down into my soul did his words sink, exciting emotions of tenderness, and gratitude, and affectionate endear-

ment which it were impossible to describe. For a few moments, too, did I feel my courage giving way—my fortitude deserting me—my resolves melting like the snow when the sun is up. Happiness was within my reach—the hope of many long months could now be fulfilled if I said but the word! And that word rose up from my heart—it came to the very tip of my tongue—it wavered upon my lips—it was nearly spoken: and yet I did not speak it! All in an instant a sense of duty sprang up within me; and I felt that it would be wrong to allow my selfishness to endanger the happiness and ruin the prospects of that bright and beautiful youth who was ready to sacrifice everything for me. The noblest return I could possibly make for such enthusiastic love was to refuse to become the means of precipitating him into poverty, and perhaps ruin. Besides, the idea of entering into a family every member of which, save *one*, would spurn and scorn me—and that *one* would likewise be cast off——no, no—I could not consent to it!

"My dear Eustace," I said, speaking with the calm firmness of resuscitated fortitude, "you listened to my counsel when I proposed last year that a certain agreement should be entered into; and I now more than ever rejoice at the wisdom of that proceeding. But will you be guided by me again? We are yet young—very young; and circumstances may take a turn in our favour. Let us, then, follow Lady Wilberton's advice. If two or three years hence you still entertain the same feelings towards me——as I am sure you will——and you may rely that those feelings will be reciprocated by me——we may yet hope for happiness. Lady Wilberton will espouse your cause; and perhaps your father will relent. Do, do, dear Eustace, agree to this arrangement!"

"O Mary, it is next to madness to think of it!" he exclaimed passionately. "Did you not promise me that if on the attainment of my majority we both experienced an unaltered love, you would become mine?"

"Yes—it is true, Eustace," I answered: "but I could not *then* foresee that your prospects would change and that poverty would await you. O believe me, not for an instant was I ever dazzled by the hope of becoming rich through my alliance with you. No, no—would to heaven that I had a fortune to bestow upon you—or that you never had one to lose! Would to heaven," I repeated vehemently, "that there were anything bordering upon an equality in our conditions! But it is not so: and it would cut me to the quick to behold you doomed to succumb to altered circumstances. Instead of our marriage being a source of happiness to me, every privation you might have to undergo and every self-denial of once-accustomed luxuries on your part, would be the bitterest of reproaches that I should have to make to myself. Eustace, I love you—I adore you—I would lay down my life for you——heaven knows," I cried, the tears raining upon my cheeks, "I would do anything to contribute to your happiness—but nothing, nothing to endanger it!"

I clung to him, weeping bitterly—but gazing earnestly up through the dimness of my tears into his countenance; and straining me to his breast, he kissed away those tears, saying everything that was fond, and kind, and tender.

"Beloved Mary," he exclaimed, "even while this decision on your part pierces me to the very soul, yet it is impossible for me to do otherwise than admire the purity of your motives the excellence of your heart! Can you wonder, then, that knowing what a treasure you are, I should long to make you mine? Oh! dearest girl, your courage and your generosity teach me the sublimest of lessons. Never, never can I love you less than I do at this moment; and the love which I now feel for you is illimitable beyond the power of language to describe!"

"And you will do all I ask you, Eustace?" said I, pressing his hand to my lips.

"It were a sin not to do so!" he replied. "Be it, then, as you say! But only on one condition," he immediately added; "which is, that henceforth there shall be no silence between us—I mean that we shall correspond and write to each other often, very often!"

I reflected for a few moments, during which I perceived that Eustace was actually trembling with the nervousness of suspense.

"Yes," said I: "we will correspond."

"Thanks—a thousand thanks!" he exclaimed exultingly: "this is at least a consolation. But, dearest Mary, you must not think of returning to that laborious mode of life which you have hitherto pursued. You are my own affianced bride—and you will not refuse to receive from my hands that which will enable you to live in comfort and happiness until the joyful day shall arrive when I may lead you to the altar."

"No, dear Eustace," I answered; "not even at your hand could I eat the bread of idleness. Devotedly, fondly as I love you, I should nevertheless feel humiliated at being so placed. I will not wound your generous heart by even surmising for an instant that your pride recoils from the idea of my returning to those occupations which have hitherto given me my bread; because you, who have loved the humble servant-maid, will not spurn or scorn her because, in the honest spirit of independence, she persists in remaining as such until the happy day when you can raise her to a higher sphere. Do not say another word upon that subject."

Eustace made no immediate reply; but once more did he embrace me fondly. We continued to walk together for another hour, conversing upon the incidents of the past; and I gave him a minutely detailed account of everything that had occurred to me since last we met—not forgetting the adventure in St. Giles's. Eustace was much struck by the anecdote of the Gipsy Queen's experiment in palmistry and her prophecies; and he was as profoundly puzzled as myself to conjecture how she had possibly obtained her information relative to this November appointment which was now being kept. For an hour, I say, did Eustace and I walk together in the lane; and at length I ventured to suggest that it would be prudent for us to separate.

"Dear Mary," he said, "I will not ask you to meet me again ere I leave Ashford, much as I should rejoice at the prospect of such happiness; because I know that you will immediately tremble lest I should endeavour to dissuade you from the understanding now settled between us. You have given me proofs of the sublimest fortitude; and I must not show myself insensible of such an example.

Within an hour, therefore, after I bid you farewell, shall I leave the town. But in a few days I shall write to you; and most anxious shall I be to receive a letter in reply. Remember your promise, my sweet girl, that we are to correspond."

"Need I say, dear Eustace, that your letters will be the greatest consolations and the dearest objects that I can possibly treasure up?"

We then embraced—for the parting moment had now come. He held me in his arms with an almost frenzied violence: he would not let me leave him. For some moments I clung to him—for I also felt that it was scarcely possible to part. Again and again did he kiss me; and I returned those fond caresses. Then we parted—and I hurried away with a sensation as if the very chords that bound me to existence were being severed and that the slightest touch would disunite them altogether.

CHAPTER LIX.

MY SIXTH PLACE.

About a week after my meeting with Eustace Quentin, I received an intimation from the landlady of the *Saracen's Head* Hotel that a family had just arrived at her establishment who were in want of a nursemaid. I accordingly repaired to the hotel, and was at once conducted into a room where a gentleman and three ladies were seated. A little boy about six years old and a little girl a couple of years younger, were playing about on the sofa. The gentleman appeared to be some three or four years over fifty: he was very stout, as well as short and thickset. His look was grave and reflective, sometimes for a moment assuming a stern expression as if he were inwardly grumbling to himself. He was dressed in a suit of black, all his clothes hanging rather loosely on him, as if he liked to feel comfortable in them. A massive watch-chain with an immense number of seals, depended from his fob; and he wore a great seal-ring on one of his fingers.

One of the ladies was his wife—the other two were his daughters: but the first-mentioned was a second wife, and the two little children playing about were the offspring of this marriage. I may as well at once mention that the name of the family was Bull. Mrs. Bull was about thirty years of age, and evidently a frivolous lady, giving herself very great airs—full of the most abominable affectations of fineness—and yet looking insignificant though apparelled in a dress of the richest materials. It was quite clear that she considered herself to be infinitely superior to her husband, and likewise to her two step-daughters. She was by no means good-looking; but had a red nose, an unwholesome complexion, a somewhat pimply face, and eyes of a greenish colour with a sly expression. She was thin—not very tall—and though far from graceful, yet not altogether unladylike in her figure. Her two step-daughters were respectively about twenty-five and twenty-three—tolerably good-looking, and very like each other, so that it was easy at once to perceive that they were sisters. They had dark brown hair showering in ringlets down upon their shoulders—small noses, the least thing turned up, or what the French call *retroussé*—rosy cheeks, red lips, and very fine teeth. They were dressed in the same costly style as their mother-in-law, and were if possible more fully steeped in abominable affectations than herself. But then there was something positively vulgar in the affectations of the young ladies, whereas this was not the case with Mrs. Bull. With regard to the toilet of the two sisters, it might be said that they were elaborately rather than handsomely dressed, everything about them indicating over-care. They experienced, and indeed studiously showed, a supreme disdain for their mother-in-law, and were very far from being dutiful to their father: so that I had not been a quarter of an hour in their presence, before it struck me that altogether this must be a very curious family indeed if it were a happy one, with so many heterogeneous elements in the composition of its members.

As I dislike interrupting the thread of my narrative for the purpose of introducing descriptive matter, I may as well record in this place a few more particulars relative to Mr. Bull and his family; though what I am about to state I did not of course learn until a later period. Mr. Bull was a man who had risen from nothing. He had commenced the world as an errand-boy in a warehouse; and being of a saving, cautious, and shrewd disposition, had gradually worked his way up till he was enabled to open a little shop of his own. Constantly persevering—losing no opportunity of turning a penny—ever intent upon saving and amassing money—he in due course became a warehouseman himself. His first wife was a worthy butcher's daughter, and presented him with two children. She died early; and as time rolled on, no one ever expected that Mr. Bull would embark in a second matrimonial venture. It however happened that his solicitor's daughter, a lady most likely as keen and cunning as her father, succeeded in captivating Mr. Bull; and as all solicitors are gentlemen by Act of Parliament, their daughters are by the reflection of rank "ladies" beyond dispute. Now Mr. Bull, having grown rich, thought it a very fine thing to marry a lady, particularly as her "pa" was accustomed to give parties at which two or three lords and half-a-dozen baronets were paraded off as the "lions" of the evening, their wives no doubt shining with the lustre of "lionesses." It is true that these lords were all embarrassed and the baronets all insolvent, and therefore so much at the mercy of Mr. Screwby the attorney as to be compelled, whether they would or not, to embellish his parties with their presence. Now Mr. Bull, though shrewd and cautious enough in making money, resembled the generality of London citizens—that is to say, next to Mammon worshipping nothing so much as a Lord. It therefore occurred to Mr. Bull that if he married Miss Screwby the solicitor's daughter, he should at once get into the very best society. The marriage accordingly took place, to the infinite disgust of Miss Elizabeth and Miss Lydia Bull, as well as to the amazement of all the friends and acquaintances of the entire Bull family. Mrs. Bull soon showed her airs, always taking an opportunity to make Mr. Bull understand that any position which he had acquired in "genteel society" was altogether owing to her. At first the two Miss Bulls, being girls in their teens at the time, were compelled to be submissive to their mother-in-law; but as they grew older they exhibited an increasing impatience of such restraint

and strongly resented the airs which she gave herself on account of her superior rank in society. Perpetual quarrels were taking place between the mother-in-law on one side and the step-daughters on the other; so that poor Mr. Bull's temper had become soured, and his feelings expressed themselves in constant mutterings, grumblings, and fault-findings. Altogether it was a very curious family indeed. I should add that Mr. Bull had retired from business, but that the family-dwelling continued to be in the City; for Mr. Bull was a member of the Common Council and had the certainty of receiving the alderman's gown of his ward the moment the present possessor (who was paralytic) should be gathered to his fathers.

But to return to my introductory interview with this amiable family. On entering the room at the hotel where they were seated, I observed that Mrs. Bull at once assumed a very lofty and knowing air; while the two young ladies tossed their heads, glanced contemptuously at their mother-in-law, and then whispered to each other evidently in terms of disgust relative to that lady. Mr. Bull seized the poker and gave the fire a tremendous stirring, which nearly stirred it out; grumbling at the same time about "coals being slates," and intimating in a gruff voice of deep dissatisfaction "that it was not so in his younger days."

"Come forward, young woman," said Mrs. Bull, "and let me see the light upon your face. I always judge people by their countenances."

"I wonder what opinion mother-in-law forms of herself when she looks in the glass," whispered the elder Miss Bull to her sister, but quite loud enough to be heard.

"The landlady of this hotel," resumed Mrs. Bull, fixing her gaze upon me after having glanced daggers at her step-daughters, "has spoken very highly of you: but being a townswoman of yours, I dare say she is partial. Where have you lived before?"

"At Lord and Lady Harlesdon's, and at Mr. and Mrs. Twisden's," was my answer.

"Oh! the Harlesdons?" observed Mrs. Bull. "Well, they will do. I know them very well by name, although we are not on visiting terms with them."

"No—I don't think that Lord Harlesdon is one of the great aristocrats whom Mr. Screwby parades off," said Miss Lydia Bull, with a malignant glance at her mother-in-law.

"Be quiet, Theodore—and you too, Georgiana!" exclaimed Mrs. Bull, speaking angrily to the two little children, who at that moment were amusing themselves by upsetting the chairs.

"It's all because they are badly brought up," muttered Mr. Bull in a grumbling voice. "Children were very differently treated when I was a boy."

"Forgive me, Mr. Bull," said his wife, "for reminding you that when you were a boy you were not accustomed to genteel society."

"I suppose, then, mother-in-law," said the elder Miss Bull, colouring with indignation, "you think that *you* were in good society from your very birth: but Mr. Screwby was not *always* a gentleman by Act of Parliament."

"Come, come," grumbled Mr. Bull, "there's enough of this; and the young woman is waiting for an answer."

"Of course you are accustomed to children," said Mrs. Bull, "and will take the greatest care of them. Mind, I am extremely particular—and you must be very attentive to their manners. I like everything that is very genteel."

I assured Mrs. Bull that I would endeavour to give her every satisfaction. She then asked me a great many questions relative to my capacities for the situation of nursemaid, but with which I need not trouble the reader.

"We have been passing some little time with some friends in this part of Kent," said Mrs. Bull, when I had satisfactorily responded to all her queries; "and the nursemaid whom we had with us behaved herself so ill that I was compelled to discharge her suddenly. We leave for London to-morrow morning, and therefore you must be here at nine o'clock to accompany us."

I gave my assent to this arrangement, and then took my departure. Jane was now restored to the kind care of Mr. Collins's housekeeper; and I passed the remainder of that day with her and William. I could not go over to Talbot Abbey to see Sarah, not having time sufficient: but I found leisure to write her a tolerably long letter, in which I gave her the best advice I could, and which was couched in terms that I thought would be the least calculated to offend her somewhat haughty and independent spirit. In the evening I took leave of William and Jane, and early on the following morning repaired to the *Saracen's Head*, according to promise. All the places inside the coach (which was intended to hold six persons) had been secured; and thus the family, including myself, completely filled the vehicle. On reaching Canterbury, it was found impossible to obtain accommodation for the whole of us inside any coach going to London, as those stages only held four. At first Mrs. Bull suggested that her husband and I should ride outside: but the worthy gentleman declared he would not expose himself to the bleak November air to please anybody; and thus it was found absolutely necessary that the party should be divided, some going by one coach and some by another. Mr. Bull and his two daughters accordingly took possession of three seats inside one vehicle; while Mrs. Bull, the children, and myself, ensconced ourselves in another.

It happened that there was no occupant of the fourth place inside the coach which conveyed us—the two children, be it understood, reckoning only as one: and thus, during the whole of that tedious journey I had to endure all the displays of affectation which my new mistress thought fit to make. At one moment she was so sorry to think that she had not insisted upon Mr. Bull taking a post-chaise: at another she recollected that even the most genteel people of her acquaintance preferred the inside of a stage-coach. Then she launched forth into bitter lamentations to think that Mr. Bull would not keep his own carriage, which he was well able to do; for, thank heaven! he was one of the richest men in the Common Council: but on second thoughts Mrs. Bull consoled herself by the reflection that carriages were becoming so common she did not know but that it was positively and actually more genteel to be without one. Presently she began making all kinds of wry faces, sighing and gasping, and groaning and complaining, at such a dreadful rate that I began to be seriously alarmed.

But it appeared, as she informed me, that she was very liable to attacks of spasms, which a little medicine from a good-sized bottle that she had in a basket, could alone allay. This medicine, she gave me to understand, was made up according to the prescription of a very eminent physician: but I never in my life knew medicine to have so entirely the smell of brandy as this which Mrs. Bull took for her spasms. When fully recovered from that little attack, she suddenly began to dilate on the horrid vulgarity of the outside passengers, whom, as she stated, she had particularly noticed ere taking her seat in the vehicle; and presently, as the smell of the cigars which some of the said outside passengers were smoking, nearly made her sick, she again had recourse to the eminent physician's medicine, which thus appeared to be a sovereign remedy for nausea as well as for spasms. When the children grew hungry, she gave them each a small bun out of her basket, observing that she would not offer me any as it was horridly vulgar for grown-up people to eat inside a coach: but presently growing hungry herself, she recollected that some very genteel persons of her acquaintance were now and then accustomed to break through the general rule, and so she not only partook of the contents of her basket herself but also insisted that I should do the same. In a short time she found the buns lay so very heavy on her stomach, that she was compelled to have recourse again to the physician's admirable medicine; and it certainly seemed to do her a great deal of good, not only curing her of every ailment she complained of, but also rendering her full of spirits and exceedingly talkative.

By the time we reached London I had seen quite enough of my new mistress to make me repent somewhat that I had so hurriedly entered her service; and it struck me for the first time in my life that inasmuch as masters and mistresses exact the most rigid information relative to the characters of the servants whom they engage, they on their part ought to give equivalent guarantees and references to the servants. Mrs. Bull was flippant in her conversation—vain, frivolous, and conceited in her character—at one time talking to me with a familiarity bordering upon levity, at another moment studiously saying or doing something to assert her own immense superiority, and make me feel what she doubtless considered to be my equally immeasurable inferiority. She was likewise particularly attached to the medicine-bottle, which she replenished at an hotel at Gravesend where we stopped to dine; and this proceeding she was not enabled to manage so secretly as to prevent me from discovering, what indeed I had all along suspected, that there was no need to send the bottle to a chemist so long as there was a landlord or a barmaid to fill it.

It was nine o'clock at night when we alighted at the coach-office in Gracechurch Street, London; and there Mr. Bull, who had arrived in the metropolis half-an-hour before us, was waiting. His two daughters had gone home in advance; and he was grumbling bitterly at having been kept standing about in the cold expecting the coach which contained his wife, the children, and myself. As for the children they had long been fast asleep; and although Mr. Bull's house was at no great distance and a porter might have carried the luggage, it was nevertheless requisite to have a hackney-coach for the sake of the little ones. Ten minutes brought us to Old Broad Street, where the lumbering vehicle pulled up opposite a house which, at the first glimpse I caught of it by the street lamps, seemed one of those dingy dark-red brick habitations, with narrow windows, in which that district of the metropolis abounds. Mr. Bull grumbled at the fare which the hackney-coachman exacted—grumbled also because *he* grumbled at having to carry the luggage into the passage without another fee—and then grumbled again on entering the house, because the hall-lamp was not lighted and the female-servant who answered the door had rushed up with a kitchen-candle that was immediately puffed out by the draught.

I conveyed the two children into a parlour on the ground-floor, where I laid them upon a sofa according to Mrs. Bull's order until it could be ascertained that the nursery was fit to receive us. Here I may mention that, besides myself as nursemaid, I found the domestic part of the establishment to consist of three females—a cook, a housemaid, and a parlour-maid; the last mentioned also serving as lady's-maid for her mistress and the two sisters. No man-servant was kept—Mrs. Bull finding time amidst the bustle of the return home to intimate to me that I must not expect to see a footman or any liveried domestics about the premises, as they were so common now-a-days it was much more genteel to dispense with them altogether.

The house was in complete confusion, a letter which had been written to announce the day of the family's return having miscarried, and the servants being thus taken entirely by surprise. None of the beds were aired—nearly all the carpets were up—the curtains had been taken down from the windows—charwomen had been busy in washing the whole place from top to bottom, so that the stairs and several of the rooms were as wet as the streets after a shower of rain. The children, who were disturbed by being removed from the hackney-coach, sat up on the sofa and commenced crying because they were tired and sleepy and wanted to go to bed. Mr. Bull grumbled because the cloth was not laid for supper: the elder Miss Bull was singing out from the top of the stairs for Susan the parlour-maid to come up and help her change her things: while Miss Lydia was shrieking out from the kitchen below to the effect that the old cook was tipsy and there was not a spark of fire in the grate. As for Mrs. Bull, she had thrown herself into a great easy-chair, declaring that the sight of the house in such a condition had produced so powerful an effect upon her that she thought she must faint. On this point however she seemed to change her mind, and once more had recourse to the sovereign remedy which she carried in her basket. To be brief, it was some time before I could get up into the nursery with the children: and very glad I was when I once found myself there. Having put them to bed, I speedily sought my own couch; and much exhausted with the day's travelling, soon fell asleep.

Throughout the whole of the next day I saw very little of my master and mistress or the two young ladies: the weather was bad—the rain poured down in torrents—I was therefore unable to stir out with the children, and had to keep in the nursery. On the following day Mrs. Bull came up in the evening; and as I suppose that she had not been

partaking of so much of her medicine as when we were together in the stage-coach, she was in neither good spirits nor in a good humour—but very cross, peevish, and disposed to find fault.

"I understand," she said, "that you let the children eat twice of meat and twice of pudding at dinner to-day. You sent down their plates to the kitchen all those times to be replenished. Now this I can't allow. I must not have my children stuffed to so vulgar an extent."

"Such small quantities were sent up, ma'am, each time for the children," said I, "that I begged the housemaid, who brought up the dinners, to procure them some more. Indeed, they cried for more; and it was impossible to pacify them."

"Yes—but it is your place to pacify them," rejoined Mrs. Bull sharply: "you are here for that purpose. It is horrid vulgar to allow children to stuff as they choose. Indeed, all genteel people are trying to dispense with eating as much as possible. And then I understand that you gave them each two cups of milk-and-water at tea. This will not do: it only encourages them in bad habits. Understand me once for all—I wish my children to be genteelly brought up—good manners as well as good morals."

"I am sorry, ma'am," I said, "that I should have infringed your regulations concerning the children; but what I did was for the best."

"And it turns out to be the worst," answered Mrs. Bull. "But you will know for the future how I wish them brought up. It is not through stinginess that I speak: because you yourself, for instance, may eat and drink as much as ever you like: but Mr. Bull is a dreadful gormandizer, and I do not mean that he shall bring his children up in she same style. It really makes me sick to think of the shocking vulgarity that prevails in the City: nothing but eating and drinking all day long! Mr. Bull's two daughters may do as they like; but *my* children," she added with strong emphasis on the pronoun, "shall be brought up in quite a different manner. So for heaven's sake, whatever you do, Mary, don't let them stuff themselves like their father and step-sisters."

Having given these and several other injunctions relative to the genteel treatment which she expected her children to receive, Mrs. Bull descended from the nursery.

In the course of a few days I obtained an insight into the gormandizing propensities on the part of her husband and step-daughters to which she had alluded. I never saw such a house for eating and drinking in all my life. The breakfast in the parlour was of the most substantial description; and while Mrs. Bull, in the fineness of her gentility, could scarcely get through half a muffin or a piece of buttered toast, Mr. Bull and his two daughters made hearty inroads upon spiced beef, pigeon-pie, broiled ham and eggs, or cold fowl and tongue. At about twelve o'clock lunch was served up, consisting of either cold joints or hot beef steaks, accompanied by bottled ale and porter, with cherry-brandy afterward. The family dined at five; and the dinner was of a substantiality to suit the preceding meals Rich soups, such as mock turtle or ox-tail—fish—haunches of mutton, savoury pies, and various made dishes—then plum-puddings, jellies, creams, and custards—and a copious dessert,—such were the component parts of the evening's banquet. At seven tea and coffee were served up: but this was also made a regular meal. Plates piled up with muffins, crumpets, and rounds of buttered toast, were placed upon the table; and in order to encourage an artificial appetite where none naturally existed, such relishes as anchovy paste, sardines, and other piquant condiments, were supplied. But the day's gormandizing did not end here: for at half-past nine o'clock the table was spread for supper, when not only were all the cold joints, pies, and other substantial viands left from dinner, crowded upon the board, but such additions as lobsters, oysters, and crab-pies were served up. The spirit-stand was then placed on the table: and while Mr. Bull mixed a very large tumbler of hot brandy-and-water for himself, he filled two smaller ones for the behoof of his daughters. I should add that he likewise brewed a large tumbler for Mrs. Bull: for although this lady detested gormandizing, yet she was by no means averse to stimulating beverages.

The main consideration of life with Mr. Bull and his two daughters appeared to be summed up in the words "eating and drinking." During the whole time they were at breakfast, they discussed and settled what should be ordered for dinner; and when the said breakfast was over, it was quite a formal and solemn proceeding to have up the cook and give her instructions on that grand and important subject. At lunch time Mr. Bull and the two young ladies discoursed upon little else than the prospects of dinner; the father, for example, grumbling at the absence of pepper in the soup of the previous day, and hoping that it would not be omitted in future; while the elder Miss Bull expressed her joy that there was going to be a plum-pudding, "as cook did excel in it so;" and Miss Lydia looked forward with equal delight to the prospect of some particular made dish for which she had found a receipt in a recently published cookery-book. Then again, at dinner-time, the father and his daughters would observe that they had noticed some splendid lobsters that day at the fishmonger's; and so forthwith was it settled that there should be lobsters for supper. Even at supper-time was the same style of conversation pursued: for as Mr. Bull cut slices from a sirloin he would not fail to observe that the bone would be an excellent grill for next morning's breakfast.

I have already said that Mr. Bull was a tremendous grumbler. Nothing appeared to give him satisfaction, save when actually at his meals; and then he abandoned himself so completely to the delights of eating and drinking, that he never quarrelled with the succulent dainties before him. But if he did grumble at such times, it was, as I have ere now stated, in recollection of some past fault in the cooking department of his establishment. When not at meals, Mr. Bull found everything amiss. The newspaper was sure to come too early or too late; the room was invariably too hot or too cold: if it rained he grumbled that he could not go out—and if it were fine, he grumbled because he had no business in hand as an inducement to go out. If no friends dropped in to call or to share in one of the meals, he grumbled because the house was dull; and when his friends did come, he grumbled after they were gone at being pestered with such intrusiveness. He never was satisfied

with the leading article of the *Times*, although it was his favourite newspaper: sometimes it was too strong, at other times it was too weak: it never suited him—not even when it was a regular grumbling article itself. I heard it said by one of his daughters that when he went to the theatre he was grumbling with little intermission from the rise to the fall of the curtain. Whenever the audience applauded, he grumbled at their folly in liking "such nonsensical stuff;" and if they did not applaud, he grumbled at their apathy. He grumbled at the lady before him for not taking off her bonnet—at the gentleman next to him for thrusting his elbow into his ribs—and at the one behind him for leaning over his shoulder.

If the post brought a great many letters from friends or acquaintances, Mr. Bull would grumble at the trouble of answering them; and when the postman passed by the house without knocking at the door, he grumbled to think that he should have retired from business and thus had nothing to do If the children were kept up in the nursery all day, he grumbled that they were never brought down to him; and when they were introduced to the parlour, he grumbled that they made such a noise which gave him the headache. If his daughters made their appearance at breakfast in negligent apparel, he grumbled that they were slovenly; and if they came down dressed out finely, he grumbled at their extravagance. In conversation with his friends he was likewise a continuous grumbler. He grumbled against Ministers for not reducing the taxation; but if he heard another person talk in the same strain, he would grumble at "such revolutionary doctrines" being mentioned in his presence. In the Common Council he invariably made long grumbling speeches, and passed for a very liberal-minded man because he grumbled against everything and gave his support to nothing. It was through grumbling in this way at the Guildhall that

some liberal borough in the country, believing him to be a man of very independent opinion, sent a deputation offering to return him to Parliament at the next election: but he grumbled that his principles should have been so much misunderstood, and that he should have been taken for a Whig whereas he was a Tory. It was said of him in the Common Council that he condemned every measure, opposed every motion, grumbled at every amendment, and groaned at every speech. If he went on a pleasure excursion with his family and a party of friends, he never laughed and joked, nor seemed to enjoy himself—save at dinner-time; but grumbled at everything. The roads were too dusty or too damp; the sun too bright or the heavens too cloudy; the carriage either went at a snail's pace or else at a break-neck rate; and the bill at the hotel elicited more grumblings than anything else. But were I to continue my illustrations of the modes and manners of Mr. Bull's grumblings, I should fill whole pages: whereas I have subjects of far greater interest and importance wherewith to occupy myself and engage the attention of my readers.

CHAPTER LX.

THE MISS BULLS.

I HAD been about three weeks in my new place, when a circumstance occurred which I must here mention.

One day the elder Miss Bull came up into the nursery, and sitting down, began to converse with me in the most condescending and affable manner possible. I was somewhat astonished at this, inasmuch as the two young ladies were accustomed to treat me and the other servants with an affectation of the utmost pride—almost disdain; as if to make us know and keep our distance. But upon the present occasion Miss Bull went on chatting away with a familiar glibness which made me at first fancy that she had been taking some of her mother-in-law's medicine, or at all events a double allowance of bottled ale at lunch.

"Well, Mary," she said, "I do hope that you are happy and contented in your new place. I know very well that you have a great deal to put up with: for if pa ever comes up into the nursery it is only to grumble and find fault; and when mother-in-law honours you with her presence it's only to give herself airs or show off her affectations. Besides," continued Miss Bull, leaning forward and dropping her voice to a confidential whisper as she pointed to little Theodore and Georgiana, who at the instant were disputing the possession of a toy in the corner of the nursery, "I know that those children are the nastiest and most ill-tempered little things in the world. God forgive me for saying so; since I suppose I must consider them as my brother and sister: but I know that it *is* the case. Now don't say it is not, Mary, there's a dear girl: for I am sure it is. You are much too good-natured; and if I were you, I should be tempted to give them each a good whipping."

"I should not think of such a thing, Miss," was my answer, uttered with some degree of indignation. "I have been in several places and had children of all shades of disposition to deal with; and I never laid a hand upon one of them yet."

"Oh! of course you know best how to manage them, Mary," exclaimed Miss Bull, with a most gracious smile; "and I would not for the world attempt to dictate to you how to treat those little monkeys:"—and she again pointed to Theodore and Georgiana. "But as I was saying just now, I know you have a great deal to put up with at times, and so have all the servants in this house—though I and Lydia do our best to mitigate the severities of pa and mother-in-law."

I was rather astonished at the boldness of this declaration: for I had neither heard nor seen of a single instance in which either of the Miss Bulls had attempted to screen a servant's fault, nor where they had failed to raise a perfect storm in the house when one was committed.

"You see, Mary," she continued, chattering away with exceeding volubility, and frequently tossing her head so that her showering curls shook like bunches of clematis in the wind,—"poor pa would be all very well in his way if he wasn't worried to death by mother-in-law's airs and nonsense. He never used to grumble or get out of temper before he married her; but he has gradually been getting worse and worse—till at last it is quite unpleasant to live with him. For my part, I and Lydia have made up our minds,"—and here again she leant forward and spoke in a confidential whisper,—"to get out of the place as soon as we can."

I gazed upon Miss Bull with some degree of astonishment: for it naturally struck me that she and her sister were thinking of running away from home.

"Ah! I see you don't understand me," she said, with a subdued laugh; and again she shook her curls with an affectation of girlish artlessness, which however ill became a young woman of five-and-twenty: "but the truth is that I and Lydia are seriously thinking of getting married."

Miss Bull looked at me earnestly—doubtless to see what effect this confidential and mysterious announcement would produce upon me. But I really could not help smiling, for it struck me as being indescribably ludicrous that two ladies of their age, who had hitherto failed to obtain any eligible offers, should now of their own accord make up their minds to be married—as if the mere fact of doing so must at once bring suitors to their feet. Besides, it occurred to me as being rather probable that it would have required no excessive persuasion to induce them to marry any time for the half dozen years past, had any very captivating candidates for their hand presented themselves.

"You smile, Mary," said Miss Bull, blushing, "as if you thought there was something very funny in what I have told you. But I am going to communicate a great secret——"

"Really, Miss," I at once answered, both seriously and firmly, "I do not desire to be made a confidante."

"Oh! but both I and Lydia have taken a liking to you," was Miss Bull's quick response, "and you *must* listen to me:"—then she went on to speak with such exceeding volubility, and making so many impatient gestures to forbid me from interrupting her, that I could not possibly prevent her from rattling away with her confidential outpourings.

"The truth is," she continued, "I and Lydia have had a great many offers, but all from those vulgar cockneys above whom we flatter ourselves we have risen considerably. Not for a moment, however, do I consider we have received any gentility from pa's marrying old Screwby's daughter: but because we have a certain air of our own—and manners make the lady, you know, as well as the gentleman."

Here she gave a self-sufficient toss of the head, hastening to observe, "Besides, I must tell you we had the advantage of a finishing school at Kensington, where pa paid sixty guineas a-year for each of us; and *that*, you know, Mary, is something which few of the coarse vulgar City girls can boast of. Why, there's Miss Snooks, the daughter of the present Lord Mayor, who really can't spell; and yet she had her health drank the other day when all the Ministers dined at the Mansion House. Wasn't it disgusting? However, Lydia and myself have resolved never to throw ourselves away upon any linendraper's or tallowchandler's sons; and so we have been obliged to wait a little, till two real gentlemen—gentlemen in every sense of the word—should become aware of our merits."

Here Miss Bull drew herself up with another shake of her frizzy curls; and if she paused in her discourse it was only on account of having talked herself out of breath. I *was* really disgusted—not because Miss Snooks had had her health drunk at the Mansion House, but because Miss Bull was endeavouring to entertain me with her own fulsome and nauseating nonsense. But in the self-sufficiency of her conceit she could not perceive that I experienced so strong a feeling in respect to what she was saying; and she hastened to resume the thread of her subject.

"Well, Mary, I must now inform you that about a fortnight ago—just a week after our return to London—we met at the theatre two such elegant gentlemen. You remember we went with pa on that occasion—mother-in-law feeling too indisposed to accompany us—no doubt because she had taken a little too much of her medicine. Well, in the same box these two gentlemen were seated. They were so polite, and seemed to know everything about the play, and the performers, and all that was going on. Pa was in a particularly bad humour that night. He had got his black stockings splashed when getting into the hackney-coach—then the hackney-coachman had cheated him in the fare—and on arriving at the theatre the crowd was so great that pa's best hat got smashed as flat as a pancake. Besides, he had hoped to see a farce, and it turned out to be a tragedy: so that what with one thing and another he was as cross as two sticks, and went on grumbling the whole evening. I do believe that if I had whispered to him, 'What two nasty vulgar impudent fellows these are in the same box with us!' he for mere contradiction's sake would have declared that they were everything just the reverse, and would have treated them with all possible civility. But as I had the misfortune to whisper to pa, 'What nice elegant, good-looking, and polite gentlemen these are!' he grumbled, and growled, and eyed them askance, as if he took them for pickpockets. Throughout the evening they treated me and Lydia with the utmost courtesy; but every time they thus showed us any attention, pa began muttering and mumbling the most insulting things about 'members of the swell-mob,' 'suspicious characters,' and so on. He even buttoned up his pockets—tucked his gold seals and chain in his fob—and kept feeling to assure himself that his handkerchief was safe. The two gentlemen could not help seeing all this; but they were much too well-bred to appear to notice it; and to make up for pa's rudeness, Lydia and I did the best we could to appear as amiable as possible. Well, when the play was over the two gentlemen followed us out; and when a hackney-coach was called, they gallantly stepped forward and handed us in. Would you believe it, that pa actually turned round in such a savage manner and expressed a brutal wish that the constables would keep a better look-out at the doors of theatres! However, both Lydia and I managed by our looks to convince the two gentlemen that we did not sympathize with our pa's coarse rudeness; and we shook hands with them. To tell you the truth, Mary, the elder of the two gentlemen pressed my hand; and Lydia afterwards told me that the younger one did the same to her."

"Now, Miss Bull," said I, very seriously, "I would much rather not hear any more——"

"Don't be so silly, Mary!" exclaimed the elder sister: "you must and shall hear the whole of this romantic adventure. Last Monday Mr. Screwby, as you remember, gave a ball; and I and Lydia went alone together—mother-in-law being again unwell, and pa having been all day on the Aldgate Pump Committee of the Common Council. Of course we did not require a *chaperon* to go to the house of mother-in-law's father. Well, on entering the drawing-room where dancing had already begun—for we were rather late—whom should we see lounging arm-in-arm together at one extremity of the apartment, but our two elegant unknowns! They were almost immediately by our side, and seemed as delighted and surprised to meet us as we were thus to encounter them. Of course we expected them to invite us to dance; and they did so. I never saw such beautiful dancers—quite in a peculiar style too: and my partner, the elder gentleman of the two, delicately gave me to understand that it was the approved fashion of dancing that prevailed at Almack's. When the first quadrille was over and our partners had left us, we hastened to Mr. Screwby to learn who those two elegant gentlemen were. He told us that the elder was Captain Wimbledon and the younger Mr. Cavendish. What delightful aristocratic names! just such names as they ought naturally to possess! Mr. Screwby went on to say that some baronet—one of his clients—had introduced them to him; and that therefore he had invited them to his ball. Lydia and I danced with them pretty nearly the whole evening; and I am quite sure that two or three of the Lords present,—for Mr. Screwby always has Lords, you know at his balls,—were as jealous as possible at seeing me and my sister thus monopolized by the two elegant strangers. Never did an evening pass away so pleasantly; and to tell you the truth, Mary, when we were taking leave of our two elegant friends, they said such tender things that it was almost as good as proposing. I am sure if they had popped the question direct, it could not have been plainer. In short they requested to be allowed to—to—correspond with us."

Miss Bull stammered, hesitated, and blushed as she gave utterance to these last words. I must state that several times during her description of the proceedings at the theatre and the ball, I endeavoured to interrupt her: for I felt not only disgusted but also indignant at being made the confidante of such a mixture of nonsense and indelicacy. But Miss Bull would compel me to listen; and I was therefore obliged to submit. When, however, she broke off at that point about agreeing to correspond, I rose from my chair and turned away from her in a manner which ought to have let her see what I thought of her conduct. But there never was so much conceit and self-sufficiency on the part of any female with whom I had previously come in contact during my life: she would not suffer herself to perceive that she either disgusted or shocked me, and no doubt considered it a very fine thing to talk about handsome strangers and flirting at balls.

"Now, Mary," she resumed, "I wish you to do me a service:"—and she followed me to the window to which I had taken my needle-work.

"What is it, Miss?" I asked, for the moment fancying that she had suddenly turned her attention to some other object.

"Pa is so dreadfully particular, and mother-in-law is so sly and sharp," continued Miss Bull, leaning over my shoulder and whispering, "that I and Lydia would not dare to have our letters from Captain Wimbledon and Mr. Cavendish addressed direct to us: so after talking the matter over, we thought of having them sent under cover to you."

"Miss Bull," I exclaimed, feeling my cheeks suddenly glow and burn with indignation, "this is a downright insult which you are offering me!"

"Hush—for heaven's sake!" said Miss Bull quickly; for Master Theodore came close up to us and began staring at me as if he thought I was quarrelling or being quarrelled with.

"I certainly do not wish to expose you or make mischief," was my answer, delivered in a voice so that Theodore could not catch what I said; "although perhaps, if I did my duty, I should make my master acquainted with what you have said to me. But I will hold my tongue on condition that you never address me in such terms again."

While I was thus speaking, Miss Bull turned red and pale a dozen times in a minute: she blushed at having exposed herself to such reproofs from me, and she grew white with rage at the manner in which I treated her. I could even see that she was scarcely able to subdue an outburst of tempestuous fury: but she no doubt saw the prudence of keeping down her anger as much as possible, lest she should provoke me to explain everything to her father.

"Well, Mary," she said—but her white lips were quivering as she spoke,—"since you won't do me and Lydia this little favour, I at least hope you will forget that I have asked it; and you mustn't think that I shall treat you any different on account of what has taken place."

I did not choose to give any reply; and Miss Bull, after hesitating for nearly a minute, as if still wanting to say something more but not liking to do so, quitted the room.

I resumed my seat, and went on with my needle-work, reflecting the while upon all that had just taken place; when, in about a quarter of an hour, Mr. Bull came up to the nursery.

'How is it, Mary," he asked, in his usual grumbling way, "that these children are never brought down to see me?"

"I did not know, sir," was my reply, "that I was to bring them down unless they were rung for."

"And why ain't they rung for, then?"

"I do not know, sir. Perhaps Mrs. Bull either forgets or objects."

"Oh! I dare say she forgets a great many things, and objects to others. She has just now insisted that I shall have no more lobsters for supper; because she says they give me an indigestion, and make me snore so loud at night she can't sleep. I wonder why she doesn't stuff her ears up with cotton. But how very hot you keep this nursery, Mary."

"It is a cold room, sir, unless there is a good fire."

"Cold indeed!—not so cold as the parlour down stairs. There is not a room in the house where the proper temperature is kept: in one I am roasted—in another frozen. But how dark you keep this nursery, Mary. Why do you have the window-blinds drawn three parts down like that?"

"Because, sir, the neighbours over the way are so very inquisitive, they are always looking out of their upper windows; and unless I have the blinds as you see them, those persons can notice everything that takes place in this room."

"Well, but it makes the room dark—and I hate a dark room. Down stairs Mrs. Bull always will have the blinds drawn up and the curtains pulled so far back that it's a perfect blaze of light. There isn't a room in the house that's kept properly in this respect: one is too light, and another too dark."

"I beg your pardon, sir; but will this do?"—and I drew up the blinds a little.

"No—that's too high."

"Then will this do, sir?"—and I pulled them down about half-an-inch.

"Do? no! They are a great deal too low now. But what's the reason Theodore has got such a queer-coloured pinafore on?"

"It's a new one, sir; and that's the colour of brown holland before it is washed."

"Well, then, I don't like new things."

"Shall I put him on one of his old pinafores, sir?"

"No, to be sure not. I hate old things. But I say, Mary, what time do the children dine now of a day?"

"When the servants dine, sir—at one o'clock. The dinners are cut off in the kitchen and sent up-stairs to the nursery."

"I don't like one o'clock dinners," grumbled Mr. Bull. "It's too early."

"Well, sir, it may be perhaps, generally speaking, half-past one by the time the tray comes up."

"And that's a great deal too late," said Mr. Bull. "I will have better hours kept up in the nursery. Why do you go on working when I am talking to you?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," I answered: and I laid aside the work.

"No—that won't do! Take it up again, and go on with it: I don't like to see idleness. Put some coals on the fire."

"I thought, sir, that you found the room too hot?"

"Hot? nonsense! It's as cold as a well. The parlour down stairs is hot, if you like: I am quite suffocated there. Now do pull down those blinds: everybody can see in from the opposite side of the way."

"I thought, sir, that you found the room too dark."

"Who said so? Not I. It's a great deal too light. Mrs. Bull keeps the parlour as dark as pitch, so that I can't read the newspaper when it comes; and when I do read it, there's nothing worth reading in it. I should leave off the *Times* and take the *Herald*, only the *Herald* is a great deal worse than the *Times*. Hallo! there's Theodore playing with the ink, and he will spoil his new pinafore—which would be a great pity, for he looks so well in it. Has he got any more of those new brown holland ones?"

"Yes—plenty, sir."

"Then mind you let him wear them."

At this moment there was the rapid sound of footsteps rushing up the stairs—the door flew open—and a little old gentleman, with very sharp features and quick restless green eyes, but with a marvellous activity of movement, literally bounded into the room, exclaiming, "Soakwell is dead!"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Bull, who at the first moment had begun to look uncommonly annoyed at this unceremonious appearance of Mr. Screwby—for he the visitor was: but on hearing this intelligence, my master's countenance suddenly brightened up.

"Yes—Soakwell is dead. I had some business in the City and happened to meet the Deputy of the Ward just at the end of the street here, who told me that poor Soakwell was gone. It seems," continued the attorney, speaking with extraordinary volubility and excitement, "that though given over yesterday by his physicians, poor Soakwell would have a basin of turtle brought up to him. I don't however suppose *that* would have killed him off so quick, as he was so accustomed to it: but he would drink a pint of Madeira afterwards, and so he passed a dreadful night—was very bad all this morning—and was just saying that a glass of Sherry would do him good when he expired. So I was told by the Deputy just now. I wouldn't lose a moment, but rushed off here to tell you the news. The housemaid who opened the door said you was in the nursery; and so I bounded up ten stairs at a time."

I should inform the reader that Mr. Soakwell, whose death seemed to be such a source of congratulation on the part of Mr. Bull and his father-in-law, was the Alderman of the Ward; and I have before stated that Mr. Bull had every prospect of succeeding the deceased in his civic dignity.

"Now, my dear fellow," continued the voluble and excited lawyer, "you must begin canvassing directly. Let your measures be well taken—issue invitations for a dinner to the principal livery-men—and secure all the public-houses for the committees. Mr. Danks will be sure to be in the field against you, and you know that Danks is an active business-like fellow. Besides, that speech he made in the Common Council the other day, about the street-organ nuisance, has given him a good deal of popularity with the shopkeepers; and his voting for the new pump in Aldgate was likewise a capital hit. So you must expect opposition. However, you know best: I am not a City man—I only go by what I have been told."

"Come down stairs, and we will have a bottle of wine to talk this matter over," said Mr. Bull.

He and his father-in-law then quitted the nursery; and I could not help thinking what a strange world this was, that a death which would probably plunge an entire family into deep affliction was made the subject of rejoicing and self-congratulation in another family.

Mr. Bull now became as busy as a bee in canvassing the livery-men, attending his different committee-rooms, and making all the necessary arrangements to ensure his election. Invitations were issued to a large number of persons who had votes; and the dinner to be given on the occasion was on the most stupendous scale of City hospitality. Mrs. Bull condescended to take considerable interest in the preparations for the banquet, inasmuch as she greatly desired to see her husband an Alderman: for a year's tenure of the Mansion House would then be in the perspective. The two Miss Bulls seemed, however, particularly indifferent to all that was going on: but during the fortnight that had now elapsed since that conversation which I had with the elder, they had been out a great deal more than was previously their custom. They constantly had shopping to do or calls to make: but I could not help suspecting that these were only excuses to enable them to meet Captain Wimbledon and Mr. Cavendish.

The day of the banquet arrived; and in the morning Mrs. Bull came up to the nursery to tell me that I should have to bring the children down to see the company at dessert-time, and that I must be very particular indeed in dressing them in the new clothes which had been purchased for the occasion. Mrs. Bull was in very high spirits, and in one of her talkative moods: but she likewise gave herself more abominable airs, if possible, than ever.

"Dear me, what a thing it is," she said, flinging herself upon a chair as if sinking with exhaustion, "to be the mistress of a large establishment like this! But if Mr. Bull succeeds in his election—as I am certain he will—I must get him to launch out a little and live in a better style. Indeed, I have changed my mind about men servants, and shall insist upon having a butler and a footman. Besides, he must set up his carriage: and so we shall want a coachman and a groom. Although I know some very genteel people who keep no men servants at all, yet it is better to be on the right side and be completely fashionable. So we *must* have our men-servants. I have already settled in my mind what their liveries shall be. Only think how awkward it is having to borrow a couple of footmen from one's friends to wait at table to-day. Everybody will notice that their liveries are different; because Alderman Dumpkins' footman who is coming, has blue turned up with silver; and Mr. Deputy Grigson's footman has scarlet edged with gold lace. However, I know some very genteel people who have two sorts of liveries in wear for their footmen; and so our arrangements won't look so very bad after all. Dear me, these spasms will be the death of me! Do run, Mary, and get me up my medicine-bottle."

Mrs. Bull had suddenly begun to moan and make

hideous contortions as she writhed about in her chair: but as I proceeded to her bed-chamber to fetch the bottle I could not help thinking that if she had too many of these attacks of spasms during the day, she would not be in a very fit state to receive company in the evening.

"There now—I am well again in an instant!" she said, after partaking of a good dose of the medicine which I had been to fetch. "Ah! it was a wonderfully clever doctor who gave me this prescription. I know a great many genteel people who likewise use it; and they all speak highly of its merits. I must however run down stairs and see how that cook of mine gets on; for I know she is given to drinking: but if she does take a drop too much to-day I will pack her off, bag and baggage. There's nothing I hate so much as the habit of drinking—in a servant," added Mrs. Bull after a pause. "However, we have got a man from Birch's—the great pastry-cook's, you know, on Cornhill—to help. The turtle-soup, the patties, and a great number of the sweets are coming from Birch's. When I was in the kitchen just now—for I know a great many genteel people who go into their own kitchens—they were all hard at work down there; and it was quite a pleasure to see with what a masterly hand Birch's man was larding the veal. The cook was busy with the plum-pudding; and Mrs. Huggins, the charwoman, was helping her to knock off a little pastry. Such a prime haunch of venison there will be; and Birch's man says it shall be cooked to a turn. Now, so much depends upon the turtle and the venison! If *they* are good, Mr. Bull will carry the day: but if they should turn out bad, every livery-man who dines with us to-day will turn round and vote against him. Ah! you may stare, Mary; but I can tell you that such is the case. The livery-men would consider their ward disgraced to all eternity, if it had an alderman who could not give a good dinner. But, dear me! what a sudden shooting pain I have got in the head. It takes me right through the brain like an arrow."

Of course the medicine-bottle was put in immediate requisition; and so wonderful were the effects of the dose, that the pain went away directly. Mrs. Bull now started up and hurried down stairs again to superintend the proceedings in the kitchen. This was the first time during the five weeks I had been in her service that I had seen her take the slightest concern in the culinary department: but now her ambition had to be served—she longed to behold her husband an Alderman—and it appeared from what she said that his success depended in no small degree upon the excellence of the dinner which was this day to be given.

In the course of the afternoon I had occasion to go down to the parlour to ask Mrs. Bull some question relative to the children's new clothing. She was not there at the moment: but the two Miss Bulls were alone together—and they were each reading a letter as I entered. With a sudden start they turned round, in the evident confusion of being taken by surprise: and it therefore struck me that the letters which they were thus devouring were from Captain Wimbledon and Mr. Cavendish.

"What do you want, Mary?" exclaimed Miss Lydia, very angrily: "bursting into the room in such a manner!"

"Oh! don't scold her," at once said the elder sister: then in a lower and quicker tone, and in a warning manner, she added, "Remember!"

Lydia instantaneously appeared to understand her sister Elizabeth's hint: and so did I. It was evidently to the effect that as I knew quite enough to be enabled to expose them to their father, it were impolitic to make an enemy of me.

"I merely wished to speak to my mistress," was the answer I gave to Miss Lydia's question.

"Oh! your mistress," cried this young lady, with a contemptuous toss of the head, "has taken so much of her medicine that she has gone to lie down a little."

I withdrew from the parlour; and not choosing to disturb Mrs. Bull in her own bed-chamber, returned to the nursery. At about half-past five o'clock Mrs. Bull came up. She was in very high spirits—rather too much so; and was dressed in the most extravagant style. She was a perfect blaze of jewellery: the ornaments were actually crowded upon her in a way that bespoke a desire to produce an astounding effect. Her nose was of a deeper red than ever; and her breath smelt of the medicine-bottle, notwithstanding the powerful odour of perfumes which exhaled from her handkerchief. She had come to give me some additional instructions relative to the embellishment of her children ere they were brought down to dessert; and having imparted her wishes in that respect, she said, "I am happy to inform you, Mary—and I am sure you will be pleased to hear—that everything goes on well down in the kitchen. The cook has kept sober; and it's only Mrs. Huggins the charwoman who has got tipsy. So I have packed her off without her wages, and forbade her from ever entering the house again. And now tell me candidly, how do you think I look? Ah! I see you do not like to say. In fact, you are dazzled—perhaps bewildered by such a display of jewels. Well, I know that my toilet is altogether extremely costly: but it is quite the fashion now to deck oneself like this; and I am acquainted with a great many genteel people who do the same."

After having vainly endeavoured to elicit from my lips a flattering opinion relative to her appearance, Mrs. Bull quitted the nursery and went down to the drawing-room, to be in readiness to receive her guests. At about seven o'clock I began dressing the children in their new clothes; and by the time I had thus arrayed them, a message came up to the effect that I was to take them down to the dining-room. Thither I accordingly proceeded with Theodore and Georgiana: but upon entering the room, the little girl grew frightened at the appearance of so many strangers, and I was obliged to lift her up in my arms to pacify her. The glance that I now threw round the table, showed me that there were about forty guests—the leading livery-men of the ward and their wives. I never in my life beheld so many stout people assembled together at one time and in one place. Some of the gentlemen were so corpulent that it was a wonder they did not fall off their chairs in apoplectic fits after a turtle and venison dinner. For the most part they had very red noses and watery eyes; and in their personal appearance afforded all the indications of gluttony and intemperance. The females were all outrageously fine—dressed in the gaudiest colours, and

with a most ostentatious splendour, but utterly without elegance and without taste. They also were fat and seemed to be gross feeders. Some had very red faces—and red arms too, for that matter; and all were coarse-looking and transcendently vulgar.

One of these great stout blowsy women got up from her chair, and waddled towards me with steps that literally stamped upon the floor and gave the idea of a dressed-up elephant walking.

"Give me the sweet little dear," she said, endeavouring to modulate a voice which sounded like a bassoon to the tones which are generally adopted for the purpose of conciliating terrified children.

"Yes—give Georgy to Mrs. Deputy Popkins," exclaimed Mrs. Bull from the farther extremity of the table: but as little Georgy would on no account go to Mrs. Deputy Popkins, I was still compelled to stand holding her in my arms.

"That child never *will* do what she's bid," grumbled Mr. Bull.

"Give her to me," said another dame, rising in her turn and advancing towards me. "I'm a famous hand at making children good-tempered."

"Come, Georgy dear," said Mrs. Bull, in a coaxing voice, "go to Mrs. Sheepwash:"—but Georgy would not even look at Mrs. Sheepwash a bit more than she had at Mrs. Deputy Popkins.

"Hadn't she better be taken away?" growled Mr. Bull.

"Lor, how cruel! the poor dear little thing!" said another fat City dame, whose voice sounded as hoarse and deep as if she were breathing through a speaking-trumpet. "Let me try:"—and being enormously fat, she waddled along like an immense overgrown duck.

"Now Georgy," again said Mrs. Bull, "I am sure you will go to Mrs. Pugstiles. What, not go to Mrs. Pugstiles—dear Mrs. Pugstiles!"

"No—nor to Mr. Pugstiles either, I'll be bound," muttered Mr. Bull.

"Deary me, how odd this is!" said the amiable Mrs. Pugstiles, in a deeper and hoarser voice than before. "Well, at all events, *you* will, Master Theodore?"—and taking the boy's hand she waddled back to her seat: then raising him up on her lap, she was about to reach him an orange when he upset a full glass of Port wine over her flaming crimson velvet dress. She immediately threw him off her knees, at the same time giving vent to a hoarse sound very much like the growl of a tigress.

Mrs. Bull began making a thousand apologies for her son's awkwardness; while little Theodore himself began to cry bitterly, squalling out, "I couldn't help it, ma: I didn't go for to do it."

"The children shouldn't have been had down," grumbled Mr. Bull, looking very much as if he thought that the Port-wine accident had at least lost him the vote of Mr. Pugstiles, whose aspect was awfully glum at this certain spoiling of his wife's magnificent dress.

No other lady either volunteered any kindness to Theodore, or to take Miss Georgiana; and for a minute or two I felt very awkward, as I was kept standing there with the little girl in my arms, and she clinging to my neck and concealing her face on my shoulder.

"I think you had better take the dear children away," said Mrs. Bull, looking desperately annoyed, and speaking quite savagely to me.

"Oh! not on my account!" exclaimed Mrs. Pugstiles: but her aspect terribly belied her words—for the glance which she flung upon little Theodore showed that it would have been an infinite relief to her feelings had she been able to administer a couple of boxes on the ears.

I did not wait for a second hint to the same effect as that which my mistress had already given me; but made haste to escape from the room with the children. The moment we were outside the door Master Theodore set up the most hideous squall—threw himself down on the mat in the hall—and began kicking with all his might and main. One of the footmen who had been borrowed for the occasion, came up at the time; and with an oath, he said, "You little brat, what do you mean by kicking up such a row?"

But this only made Master Theodore all the more refractory; and his cries must have reached to the remotest corner of the house. Little Georgiana, not knowing what was the matter with her brother, forthwith renewed the crying which she had commenced in the dining-room; and thus the noise was perfectly hideous. The door was flung violently open—and Mrs. Bull came out in a towering passion.

"Why don't you get these children up-stairs?" she exclaimed, her eyes darting daggers at me.

I assured my mistress that I had vainly endeavoured to make Master Theodore rise from the mat, and that if I attempted to put down Georgiana for the purpose of lifting him, she would cry all the more violently.

Closing the door of the dining-room, Mrs. Bull snatched up her darling Theodore, and bestowed upon him such a hearty box on the ears, that it must have been heard by all the guests inside the apartment.

"Take that, you nasty ill-tempered child!" she said, with a savage bitterness: then suddenly dropping her voice, she added, "You little monkey, your father has lost Mr. Pugstiles' vote through you, I am certain of it!"

Theodore now no longer refused to accompany me; but as we went up the stairs he cried and yelled worse than ever; and on reaching the nursery I had a great deal of trouble to get him to bed. But I need not dwell any farther upon the incidents of that festive evening: suffice it to say that the dinner had been magnificent—the turtle and venison were highly approved of—everything gave satisfaction, even to the pastry which the charwoman had knocked off; and thus Mr. Bull ensured the respect and admiration, as well as the interest and support, of all the leading livery-men of his ward—Mr. Pugstiles alone excepted.

CHAPTER LXI.

AN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY.

A FEW days after the dinner-party I received a letter from my brother William at Ashford, in which the following passage occurred:—

"I should not have written so soon after my last, had it not been to tell you that an elderly man, of very highly respectable appearance, and dressed in black,

came to Mr. Collins's house this morning and asked for me. He said that he had been sent down from London by a nobleman and his lady to see you: but that from inquiries he made in the town, he had learnt that you were no longer here. Being informed, however, that you had a brother in Mr. Collins's service, he had called to ask me where you were at present. I did not immediately satisfy him, not knowing whether he was telling me the truth: but he assured me that he was steward to the Lord and Lady to whom he alluded, and that it was for your advantage he wished to know your address. I instantly imagined that he must have been sent by Lord and Lady Harlesdon: and I asked him if such were the case? He said that it was, and made some excuse for not having mentioned their names in the first instance. So I no longer hesitated to tell him that you were now in the service of Mr. and Mrs. Bull, Broad Street, London; and thanking me for the information, he went away. I hope I have not done wrong, dear Mary, in telling him what I did: but as he said it was for your advantage that he was making inquiries—and knowing from all you told me that Lady Harlesdon, if not his lordship, is very fond of you—I thought it best to give him the information he required."

I was much astonished at this passage in William's letter—not only astonished, but likewise alarmed; because I knew full well that the individual who had thus been making inquiries concerning me, could *not* be Lord Harlesdon's steward. For immediately after my arrival in London I had written to Jemima to tell her where I was, and had received a letter from her in reply, stating that the family were going down to Harlesdon Park in Derbyshire for a few months, and that on their return to London she would immediately let me know, so that I might call and see her. She had gone on to say that I might pay such a visit unknown to Lord Harlesdon; and that all the servants of the household, not even excepting the steward, the butler, and other high domestic dignitaries of the establishment, would be pleased to see me, they having already said so on hearing from Jemima that I was in London. Thus had my friend Jemima written; and therefore it was quite clear that if the steward had really wanted to ascertain where I was, he could have learnt my address from her. Besides, the description which William gave of the individual who called upon him at Ashford, did not correspond with that of Lord Harlesdon's steward; and moreover it was not likely his lordship was troubling himself any farther about me and my affairs. As for Lady Harlesdon, she knew well where I was, having been informed on that point by Jemima, through whom she had sent me some kind messages.

That some treachery was at work, I had a misgiving: but what could it be? what was its object? and from what quarter would it come? The image of my evil genius, Sir Aubrey Clavering, rose up in my mind; and I feared some new persecution at his hands. Altogether, William's letter made me very dull and unhappy for the rest of that day; and during the night that followed I could scarcely sleep for thinking of it.

Next day, at about eleven in the forenoon, the parlour-maid came up to inform me that a person was waiting to speak to me down stairs. She remained with the children, while I hastened to see who it was; and on descending to a little back room on the ground floor, to which the visitor had been shown, I was immediately struck by finding myself in the presence of an individual answering the description given by William of the elderly respectable-looking person in black who had called upon him at Ashford. He looked very hard at me for a few moments, but by no means in a rude manner: his gaze was that of mingled interest and curiosity; and there was nothing in it to offend. He bowed civilly—then shut the door, which I had left open behind me—and said, "You are Miss Price, I presume?"

When I had answered him, he again surveyed me with much attention; and I experienced no inconsiderable degree of suspense to ascertain what his business could be. Perhaps I looked somewhat suspiciously at him: for he said, "Were you expecting such a visit?"

"I have heard," was my immediate answer, "that you have been making inquiries concerning me at Ashford."

"And if I used a little deception with your brother," he rejoined, "in order to induce him to give me your address, you must not be angry. I am really the house-steward to a nobleman; and it is equally true that I was sent down to Ashford by his lordship to see you."

"But it was not Lord Harlesdon who sent you," I exclaimed.

"No—in the assumption of that name as the alleged one of my master, lay the deception for which I apologize."

"Then, who is your master?"

"Lord Wilberton."

I felt the warm blood suffuse my features at this intelligence: for I of course knew in a moment that it was on account of Eustace Quentin I had become the object of the late inquiries and the present visit.

"Had I been fortunate enough to meet you at Ashford," resumed the steward, whose manner was civil and polite enough, "I should have conversed with you on a certain topic: but inasmuch as I find you in London, it will be better for you to see Lord and Lady Wilberton—and indeed, such is their desire. Have you any objection?"

I was much bewildered by this question, and knew not how to reply.

"Believe me, Miss Price," said the steward, "the happiness of Mr. Eustace Quentin—all his prospects—his entire hope of prosperity in life—every thing, in short, depends upon you! You will not be surprised if I inform you that while at Ashford I made many inquiries concerning you; and I am bound to state that everything I heard was entirely to your credit. Indeed, from what I did hear of you, I believe that you are too good, too sincere, and too generous-hearted, not to comply with the request of Mr. Eustace Quentin's parents by seeing them as early as possible."

Still I did not answer. Eustace Quentin, immediately after parting from me at Ashford, had hastened back to Ireland to rejoin his regiment. Upwards of seven weeks had elapsed since then, during which interval I had received two letters from him; and these were full of the most endearing and affectionate language. Should I be acting in a manner that he would approve of, by responding to the demand of his parents? For what purpose could they wish to see me, except to induce me to break off everything with their son? Perhaps,

therefore, Eustace might be displeased if I went to them? Yet, on the other hand, would it not be more frank, candid, and honourable for me to obey this summons on the part of the parents of him whom I loved and who loved me in return? Yes—to this conclusion I came; and I signified as much to the steward.

"Will you accompany me now?" he asked. "Can you obtain a couple of hours' leave of absence from your master and mistress?"

As I had not once asked permission to go out on my own account during the six weeks I had been in Mr. and Mrs. Bull's service, I at once felt assured that there would not be much difficulty in obtaining such leave on the present occasion. I accordingly went to the parlour, where I found Mrs. Bull seated alone.

"If you please, ma'am, I beg to request permission to go out for two or three hours."

"With whom? and for what?" quickly demanded Mrs. Bull. "I know that servants have a right to expect a holiday now and then: but I am also acquainted with some very genteel families where no holidays are given at all."

"Lord Wilberton's steward has called to speak to me on some private matter," was my response; "and he wishes me to go with him."

"Lord Wilberton's steward!" echoed Mrs. Bull, delighted at anything which savoured of aristocracy. "Oh! of course there cannot be the slightest objection. A nobleman's steward, you know, is a sort of gentleman in his way—much better than any *poor* gentleman! I suppose you are going with him to Lord Wilberton's house?"

I answered in the affirmative.

"Ah! the parlour-maid informed me that it was a very respectable-looking person indeed, who had come to inquire for you; and that is the reason why I told her not to let him stand in the hall, but to show him into the little back-parlour. If you like,

Mary, to offer him any refreshment you can do so; and you may take one of the wine-decanters off the sideboard in the dining-room. Noblemen's stewards drink as much wine as gentlemen."

I thanked Mrs. Bull for her offer, but said that I was sure the steward would not wait for refreshment. I then hurried up-stairs to dress myself; and as a matter of course put on all my best things. Perhaps I shall be pardoned by the reader on the score of any little vanity which prompted me to make myself look as well as I possibly could, now that I was to appear in the presence of Eustace Quentin's father and mother: for though I was not so silly as to fancy for a moment that they would give their consent to our marriage, yet it was natural that I should endeavour to disarm them as much as possible of the prejudices they had conceived against the poor humble servant-maid. My toilet thus occupied some twenty minutes; and when I descended to the little back parlour again, I was greatly astonished to behold Mrs. Bull there in conversation with the steward.

She was lounging in an affected lack-a-daisical kind of manner upon a sofa; while he, having risen from his chair through respect, was standing listening to the tirade of nonsense to which my mistress was giving vent in her accustomed style. I was not at all afraid that he had said anything to her relative to the object of his call, or the purpose for which I was wanted at Lord Wilberton's house: because even during the short time I was with him, I had seen enough to convince me that he was too shrewd, cautious, and reserved to indulge in mere idle gossipping.

"Of course noblemen's houses at the West End are much finer than our's in the City," my mistress was saying as I entered; "but when Mr. Bull becomes Alderman of his Ward, which he will be in a few days, I mean him to move from Broad Street—although I know a great many genteel families who live in the City. Not that he need give up this house altogether: but he can take a beautiful suburban villa at Kensington, or Clapham, or some fashionable part. For myself, however, I am not at all ambitious, and don't care much about his becoming an Alderman; although it certainly will lead to the Mayoralty in due course—and then you know, when at the Mansion House, we shall have to entertain the Ministers, and the Judges, and several noblemen from the West End, which will of course be all very agreeable in its way. Fortunately for Mr. Bull, I am well acquainted with all the usages and customs of fashionable life."

"No doubt of it, ma'am," observed the steward, with a polite bow.

"My father is an eminent solicitor in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and sees the very best company—so I am accustomed to it."

"Naturally so, ma'am," responded the steward, with another bow.

"And therefore I shall have a great advantage over the generality of Lady Mayoresses: for between you and me, the citizens' wives generally are shockingly vulgar, although of course there are a few genteel families this side of Temple Bar."

"No doubt, ma'am," said the steward, with the utmost politeness.

"But only think of the present Lady Mayoress," continued Mrs. Bull, "wearing a great yellow turban the other evening when the Ministers dined at the Mansion House. Wasn't it dreadful?"

"Dreadful, ma'am," returned the steward, courteously humouring my mistress's nonsensical foibles.

"And it's no wonder that lords and ladies at the West End consider all City people to be so dreadfully low and vulgar. But perhaps, if you have an opportunity, you would whisper to Lord and Lady Wilberton that there *are* exceptions:"—and Mrs. Bull fixed her eyes significantly upon the steward, as much as to impress him with the idea that in herself he beheld one of those brilliant exceptions to the general rule of civic vulgarity.

"I shall assuredly take the first opportunity of so doing," he answered: then no doubt anxious to escape any further infliction of Mrs. Bull's conceited egotisms, he turned to me, saying, "Miss Price, I see that you are ready; and I think that we had better depart at once."

He according made his bow to Mrs. Bull; and I then accompanied him forth from the house. We entered a hackney-coach; and as we proceeded towards the West End, the steward observed with a smile, "Your mistress is somewhat talkative. While you were absent from the room, she amused me considerably with her strivings and strainings to convince me that by her marriage with Mr. Bull she had shed a perfect halo of gentility upon the Bull family. She also endeavoured to ascertain how long I had known you, and for what reason you were going to Wilberton House: but I need scarcely tell you, Miss Price, that I did not satisfy her curiosity."

The hackney-coach proceeded to Lord Wilberton's mansion, which was situated in Piccadilly, the front facing the Green Park. It was an immense establishment, quite as extensive as Lord Harlesdon's—equally thronged with domestics—as sumptuous in its appointments and decorations—and in every respect affording the evidences of great wealth. I caught myself sighing as I followed the steward up the great marble staircase: for I could not help thinking that the possessors of such a palatial abode would not merely throw every obstacle in the way of my union with their son, but perhaps scorn and despise the bare idea of such an alliance.

I was conducted into a back drawing-room furnished in the most elegant and tasteful manner; and the steward, having hastily whispered in my ear that I was now in the presence of Lord and Lady Wilberton, and the Hon. Mr. Quentin (their eldest son), at once withdrew. I must candidly confess that I was overwhelmed with confusion as the eyes of Eustace's parents and brother were at once fixed upon me with a curiosity which, notwithstanding the rules of good breeding, they could not conceal. Lord Wilberton was a tall, portly, good-looking man of about sixty, with a very aristocratic air, in which pomposity and hauteur were blended. Lady Wilberton was a stately woman of about fifty, not particularly stout, but of a fine *embonpoint*: she was elegantly dressed in a morning costume, and at the moment I entered, raised herself up from a sort of half-lounging position on the sofa.

Ferdinand Quentin was a tall, slender, sickly-looking young man, whose age appeared to be about four-and-twenty. There was just a sufficiency of a family likeness between him and Eustace to show that they were brothers: but he possessed naught of

that striking beauty which characterized him whom I loved. His hair was brown; but instead of being of a rich hue and arranging itself in natural wavy curls, it was poor, lank, and thin. His eyes were hazel; but instead of beaming with the light of intelligence, they were dull and glassy. His features were small; but instead of having the classic outline of Eustace's profile, they were angular and insignificant. His lips were of an unhealthy paleness; and his teeth were not particularly good. When he stood up he stooped in his gait, as if he had outgrown his strength. As for his manner, it was composed of a kind of cool insolence, impudent self-sufficiency, and overweening conceit; which, blended with a certain refined coxcombry, made him even at the first glance appear to me the most insufferable creature I had ever yet beheld in masculine shape. While his father and mother surveyed me with curiosity only, he contemplated me with a contemptuous smile upon his countenance—as if he wished me to see that he was fully prepared to ridicule the idea of such a girl as myself daring to aspire to become his sister-in-law.

I have already said that I was well nigh overwhelmed with confusion on finding myself in the presence of that haughty aristocrat, that stately dame, and that self-sufficient young gentleman; and for an instant I deeply regretted that I had obeyed the call which summoned me thither. I felt the colour mounting to my cheeks; and I cast down my eyes. Never, as long as I live, shall I forget the awkwardness and embarrassment of that moment!

"Step forward, young woman," said Lord Wilberton, in a voice which he evidently tried to render as courteous and condescending as possible, but which nevertheless showed that he could not divest himself of the feeling that he was speaking to a creature only on a level with the menials whom he was accustomed to command in his own establishment. "She may sit down, I think——may she not?" and he looked dubiously towards his wife, for her to decide upon a point which he evidently considered to be of no small importance.

"Yes—you can sit down, young woman," said Lady Wilberton, who in her turn endeavoured to unbend as much as possible, but who experienced the utmost difficulty to play so unusual a part.

Again did the colour mantle upon my cheeks: but this time it was with indignation. All my awkwardness and embarrassment vanished in a moment, giving place to the pride and resentment of feelings deeply wounded by this mode of treatment. If they had kept me standing I should have experienced no annoyance: for I had not gone thither in the expectation of being treated as anything better than I was: namely, a servant dependent on my own honest industry for my bread. But to have it argued before my face how I was to be treated, was too much for even *my* patience to endure!

"I thank your ladyship," I said in a firm but perfectly civil tone; "I prefer standing."

"By Jove, I think she means to give herself airs!" said Mr. Quentin, caressing his beardless chin in a coxcombical matter.

"Hush, Ferdinand," said his mother, in a mildly reproving tone: "we won't wound the poor girl's feelings more than we can help."

"If your ladyship," I said, not taking the slightest notice of Mr. Quentin's impertinence, "has sent for me with a deliberate intention of wounding my feelings at all, I must respectfully beg leave to retire:"—and I moved towards the door.

"No—by Jove! you don't escape us like this!" cried Mr. Quentin: and rushing forward he caught me by the wrist.

"Unhand me, sir!" I exclaimed, my cheeks again becoming crimson, and I felt that my eyes were literally flashing fire.

"What a vixen!" cried Mr. Quentin: but he shrank back in affright though, all the same—as if he thought that I meant to box his ears. "Hasn't the little scullery-maid got a spirit of her own!" and he gave an affected laugh, which however concealed but indifferently the real vexation that he experienced.

"Mary Price, I beg you to stop," said Lady Wilberton, in a tone as much of entreaty as of command. "Ferdinand, you will do me a great favour if you retire for a little while."

"Can't think of such a thing, my dear mother," was his reply.

"But I am sure your father wishes it also," said her ladyship, bending upon him a frowning look.

"And I am sure that the governor wishes no such thing," was Mr. Quentin's flippant rejoinder.

Lord Wilberton looked awfully annoyed; and after a few moments' hesitation, as if fearful of provoking fresh impertinences on the part of his spoilt heir, he said, "Ferdinand, I ask you as a favour to retire for a short time."

"But it can't be done," said Mr. Quentin, flinging himself back in the chair where he had re-seated himself after his little skirmish with me at the door. "Would do anything to oblige you, 'pon my honour; but can't quite consent to be turned out of the room like a child."

"Then will you be quiet?" asked her ladyship in a deprecating and entreating tone.

"As quiet as a mouse," he replied, stretching out his long lanky legs with true aristocratic indolence: then throwing back his head, he half closed his eyes, as if with a fashionably dissipated languor.

The whole of this little scene was ineffably nauseating to me: but I saw clearly enough that it had been pre-arranged that I was to be treated in a conciliatory manner, so far as was compatible with the aristocratic pride of the Wilbertons;—and it was likewise apparent that the parents were afraid their scheme would be spoilt by the flippant impertinences of their son.

"Now, Mary Price," said Lord Wilberton, "as we have important matters to talk upon, I request you to be seated."

"Yes—pray sit down," said her ladyship; "and do not think that we purposely wish to treat you unkindly. We do not. We have no such ungenerous feeling towards you; and as we expect something from *your* generosity, we regret that the first few moments of your presence should have been marked by anything disagreeable."

"I say though," cried Mr. Quentin, "was that a slap at me?"

"Be quiet, Ferdinand," said his mother, somewhat angrily.

Mr. Quentin gave an indolent yawn—stretched out his legs still farther—threw back his head more languidly—and appeared to be sinking off into a

doze. Meantime I had taken a chair so as to avoid any farther controversy on that point; and I prepared to listen with a respectful gravity, into which I threw as much firmness as possible.

"Now, Mary Price, if you will attend patiently to me," said Lord Wilberton, "I will make you acquainted with a few facts which it is necessary you should know. My younger son Eustace has fancied himself in love with you: but you, as a sensible girl, must be well aware that marriage is not to be dreamt of in such a case. From all we have heard concerning you, we are well assured that to no dishonourable terms would you listen: nor is Eustace, we believe, capable of offering such. We do not say that there is anything selfish in whatsoever amount of affection you may have formed for him: but it is quite natural you should think of settling yourself well in life. But here I must tell you the first fact to which I have alluded—namely, that by marrying Eustace you would marry a beggar."

"My lord," I answered, "whenever I think of Mr. Eustace Quentin, it is not of his rank, his position, or of his pecuniary eventualities—it is of himself only."

"But love can't subsist without money," rejoined Lord Wilberton; "and without intending to threaten or menace unnecessarily, I must give you plainly to understand that my son Eustace is so totally dependent on me, he has not a shilling he can call his own if he acts contrary to my will. Do not interrupt me—but hear me to the end. He is a lieutenant in the army; and having served his time in that capacity, would have been promoted to a captaincy the other day when he became of age, if he had promised to fulfil my wishes in all things. But he refused—and therefore I got his promotion stopped in the Commander-in-Chief's Office. I am sorry to say he is infatuated and obstinate; and it is useless for me to reason any more with *him*. It has therefore occured to her ladyship and myself that we would communicate with *you*—to see whether your generosity is great enough to save Eustace from the disagreeable results which will ensue if you both persist in the engagement which I have every reason to believe subsists between you."

"Yes—the governor is pretty well informed on that head," exclaimed Mr. Quentin, lazily lifting himself up in his chair, as if it required an effort to give utterance to those few words: and then he lolled back again with more indolence than at first.

"Be quiet, Ferdinand," said Lady Wilberton.

"Let me come to the point at once," resumed his lordship.

"I thought you had got there already," remarked Mr. Quentin: "for you have given this young woman pretty plainly to understand that Eustace must be kept out of his fortune and cut off with a shilling in your will, if ——"

"Do be quiet, Ferdinand," interrupted Lord Wilberton, now speaking sternly. "Mary Price, what I wish you to comprehend and appreciate, is the exact position in which Eustace is placing himself—and in which, to speak candidly, you are helping to place him. If you do not consent to abandon every hope you may have formed of marrying that foolish boy, I shall without delay adopt the most energetic as well as the severest measures. I shall stop his allowance—I shall get his regiment ordered off to India—I shall prevent his promotion—I shall keep him a poor lieutenant—in a word, I shall do all I can to teach him the necessity of obedience to his father."

"Good heavens, my lord!" I exclaimed, cruelly afflicted by these threats which pierced like barbed arrows to my very heart's core: "you surely would not persecute your son thus?"

"Do not call it persecution," said Lord Wilberton sternly: "or if you do, look to yourself as the primal cause of it."

"No, my lord—no," I exclaimed, with a degree of excitement that made me speak vehemently and look frenziedly: "not for worlds would I do aught to injure the prospects of your son! If he repent of anything he has ever said to me—of any hope he has ever held out—of any promise he has ever made—heaven knows that I will release him, that I will never reproach him, but that I will make any sacrifice for his sake!"

"You are a good girl—a very good girl," said Lord Wilberton, as he exchanged a look of satisfaction with her ladyship. "It is such a sacrifice which we now ask at your hands: and therefore we have resolved upon making you a certain proposal, which, after all you have just said, you can scarcely refuse to accept. But perhaps your ladyship had better explain it," said the nobleman, again turning his eyes upon his wife.

"Yes—let mother do it," exclaimed Mr. Quentin, with another long dissipated yawn, as he ran his fingers carelessly through his thin lank hair. "Go on, mother—you will make a better hand at it than the governor."

"Really this is unpardonable, Ferdinand," said Lord Wilberton, "thus interrupting such serious discourse!"

"I merely gave my opinion—that's all," said the young gentleman: and again he laughed affectedly.

"Mary Price," said Lady Wilberton, after having bent a frowning look upon her son, "in proposing that you should make the sacrifice which we now ask at your hands, we have not been unmindful of your future welfare. His lordship has just granted the lease of a very fine farm to a young man of good steady habits, excellent personal appearance, and very passable manners, considering his position in life. He is under the deepest obligations to his lordship, and is ready to follow our advice in any way that we may point out. He is as yet unmarried, but wants a good, active, industrious, well-behaved young woman as a wife. I am sure he will like you at the very first glance; and our proposition therefore is, that if when you and he meet, you think you can like each other, your hands shall be joined with as little delay as possible, and his lordship will make you a present of a thousand guineas on your wedding-day."

I had listened in total silence to this long speech, because amazement sealed my lips. It was not exactly an amazement which showed itself in the countenance, or else perhaps her ladyship would have stopped short if she had observed that her words were producing such an effect: but it was an amazement which fastened itself as it were upon the soul, paralysing the body and fixing the features in dull staring vacancy. Even when her ladyship had done speaking, I could scarcely persuade myself that I had heard aright. The proposition appeared to combine the most flagrant insult with the

most shameless indelicacy. It offended me in every one of my keenest sensibilities: it wounded me in all the tenderest places of my heart: it shocked, it mortified, it humiliated me:—and then all those feelings flamed up into one volcanic burst of indignation.

"For what do you take me?" I suddenly exclaimed, starting from my seat. "Good heavens! what an opinion you must have formed of my character! Is it because the vitiated atmosphere which you breathe has poisoned all the generosity and sincerity of your own heart? or is it because, looking down upon me through the mist of gross prejudices which environ persons of your rank, you think that I am lost to all sense of feminine decency, of feeling, and of self-respect? Oh! your ladyship is bitterly mistaken if you think that the love which I cherish for your son is of such a nature as to permit me to transfer it in a moment to this husband of your choosing! And if I am prepared to sacrifice that love of mine to the well-being of your son, think you that gold can recompense me? think you that the best feelings of the heart are to be disposed of and purchased at a price? It may be so in your sphere, my lady: but it is not in mine! No—I scorn and despise your proposals: I am almost tempted to add that I scorn and despise those who have made them. Yet listen, my lady—and you also, my lord—to what on my side I voluntarily propose, and what on my part I spontaneously offer."

"By Jove, what a heroine!" ejaculated Ferdinand Quentin. "Perhaps she thinks herself doing the Derby affair all over again?"

"Silence, sir—and let her speak!" exclaimed Lord Wilberton, in evident amazement at all I had previously said, and in anxious anticipation that I was still inclined to make some offer that would suit the end he had in view.

"If Mr. Eustace Quentin," I continued, somewhat more deliberately than before, "will write to me and say that, everything considered, he would rather not fly in the face of his parents, and that he will make the sacrifice of his own feelings to their wishes,—then will I not merely bow to that decision, but will write him such a reply as shall strengthen him in the maintenance of it."

"And is this all that you will do?" asked both Lord and Lady Wilberton in the same breath.

"What more would you have me do?" I exclaimed. "If your son Mr. Eustace estimates me above all those worldly prospects which your lordship, as his father, seems so fatally able to control, it is not for me to resign of my own accord, or rather to repudiate that affection with which he has honoured me. But if, on the other hand, Mr. Eustace Quentin places his worldly prospects above his affection for me, then am I ready to release him from any promise he may have made me."

"Think well, young woman, what you are saying!" exclaimed Lord Wilberton, now speaking with an imperious and menacing tone. "There are ways of bringing you to your senses, of which perhaps you little dream."

Not choosing to prolong the controversy, I made a respectful salutation—rather because they were Eustace's relatives, than because their conduct deserved any show of respect on my part: and then I moved to the door.

"Stop—stay for one minute longer!" cried Lady Wilberton, rising from her seat and hastening towards me. "You really must not go away thus, Make allowances for the feeling of parents——"

"But does not your ladyship think," I asked "that allowances should also be made for my feelings?"

"Mary Price, I implore you to save my son!" said Lady Wilberton, not heeding my question. "Come—let me speak with you alone:"—and catching me by the arm, she hurried me out of the room, across the landing, into another apartment,—all this taking place so suddenly that I had not time to resist or remonstrate, even if I had been so disposed.

We were now alone together, I and Eustace Quentin's mother. Even before we left the other room she had thrown aside her patrician stateliness, and had condescended to the adoption of a tone of entreaty: but now she exhibited a still more conciliatory feeling, and with some degree of kindness desired me to sit down on the sofa by her side.

"I must confess," she said, "that you have not been altogether as well treated in the other room as you ought to have been, and as I had predetermined that you should be. All the angry words you addressed to me just now were perhaps natural enough; and I am not angry with you on that account. Indeed, I see plainly that there is more romance in this love of your's than I had at first anticipated. Perhaps you are aware of what took place between me and Eustace some few weeks ago at our seat in Yorkshire? Yes—that tell-tale look of your's shows me that you are."

"Nor do I attempt to deny it, my lady," I answered.

"You are aware then," she resumed, "that I gave Eustace to understand that if at the expiration of a few years he still found himself as deeply attached to you as ever, I would think seriously of the affair—and even perhaps use my influence with Lord Wilberton to induce him to consent to an alliance so necessary to ensure our son's happiness. Are you aware of all this?"

"I am," was my response.

"And perhaps, then, you are attaching more importance to that promise of mine than it deserves? Believe me, Mary Price, it was but an evasion—a subterfuge—a little stratagem, in a word, on my part, in order to induce my son to postpone for the present all thought of committing himself beyond the possibility of self-revocation. To speak candidly, I thought and hoped that with the lapse of time he would be cured of this foolish passion. But from a letter which I received a few days ago I learn that he is obstinately and inveterately bent upon what, in the common parlance of lovers, is termed *remaining faithful*. Ah! your countenance brightens up at this intelligence: but what is joy to you, is wretchedness to me! Now then, Mary, since my son is so blinded by this passion to his own material interests, I again appeal to your goodness, your generosity, your strength of mind, and I will even say your pride,—for I see that you possess it,—I appeal to you, I say, in the most sacred and serious manner to break off of your own accord whatever engagement subsists between Eustace and yourself."

"I cannot do more, my lady, than I have already

offered," was my answer. "Mr. Eustace Quentin is the best judge of his own happiness; and if he considers me necessary to that happiness, it would be but an ill-requital for so much love on his part if I were to do aught that would justify him in taxing me with unfaithfulness. I am willing to sacrifice my own happiness to ensure his: but I will do nothing to make him unhappy."

Lady Wilberton continued to argue, entreat, coax, and cajole for a considerable time. At length, perceiving that she could extract from me no promise beyond that which I had already given, she said,—though with some degree of hesitation, as if she had obtained too deep a reading of my character to think that the proposal would be accepted,—"If you will go to America, or to any distant part of the world, the sum of five thousand guineas shall be paid into the hands of a London banker, so as to be forwarded to your place of destination."

"Money, money—always money!" I exclaimed, rising from my seat. "Have I not already given your ladyship to understand that the world holds no amount of treasure which could induce me to prove faithless and treacherous to your son; while on the other hand, if by repenting of his engagement he should exact the sacrifice of my happiness, that sacrifice will be consummated on my part without the recompense of a single farthing."

Lady Wilberton had also risen from her seat; and as I spoke her whole appearance underwent a rapid change. Anger gathered upon her countenance, so that by the time I had done speaking fires flashed from her eyes—her lips grew white and quivered with rage—her whole form trembled—and she was convulsed with passion.

"Vile, detestable, intriguing girl!" she exclaimed, completely throwing off the mask of assumed conciliation and kindness: "think you that I cannot fathom your deceitfulness to its very depth? You know that by your artful wiles you have so involved my unhappy son in the meshes of infatuation, that there is not the remotest chance of his requiring any such sacrifice at your hands as you pretend yourself to be ready and willing to make. This you know full well; and therefore you are safe enough in volunteering such an offer, all the merit of which you hope to secure to yourself, in the full confidence that you are not likely to be called upon to act up to your words! And you dare talk of loving my son,—you, who for your own selfishness will thus blight all his worldly prospects! Well then, go and marry him—ally yourself to poverty—and when in the hour of his bitterest disappointment, of his penitence, and his remorse, he turns round and curses you as the source of his sufferings, then will you experience a condign punishment! Go and marry him if you will: but understand me well—instead of him raising you up to his rank, it will be you dragging him down to the depths of your degradation. Happiness! you spoke of happiness!—what happiness will there be for a young man whose career has commenced so brilliantly, but through you must end so darkly? Go, young woman! A thousand additional reproaches are upon my tongue; and yet I have not patience sufficient to endure you any longer in order to gain time for their utterance. Go, I say—and if you marry my son, may a mother's bitterest, deepest, most withering curse be upon your head. Go!"

At first I had listened with feelings of renewed indignation and resentment: but as Lady Wilberton went on speaking, I was overawed by the vehemence of her words and the prophetic bitterness which pervaded their meaning—till at last I shuddered all over and nearly shrieked out in horror and affright, as she invoked that tremendous malediction upon my head. She at once turned away—passed into an adjoining room—and closed the door violently behind her. I stood lingering for a few moments, cruelly bewildered what to think and how to act—half inclined to hurry after her, throw myself at her feet, and promise to fly at once from the country: but suddenly, with the influence of an angel presence, the recollection flashed to my mind that Eustace had lately written to her declaring his resolve to remain faithful to me—and I at once felt that my duty was to remain faithful to him!

Cheered and strengthened—tranquillized so by the sudden turn which my thoughts had thus taken, I issued from the apartment, rapidly descended the stairs, and quitted the house.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE GREEN PARK.

On emerging from Lord Wilberton's palatial residence, I entered the Green Park to seclude myself for a brief space from the activity, the din, and the bustle of the great thoroughfare of Piccadilly, so that I might commune a little with my own heart and thoroughly compose my feelings ere I took a conveyance back to the City. I was anxious to weigh well all that had taken place, so as to sift my conduct and arrive at a dispassionate conclusion whether I had acted well or otherwise in the course I had pursued. Although it was in the middle of winter and the weather was very cold, I sat down on a bench under one of the trees in the Green Park; and as the wind moaned amidst the skeleton boughs over my head, I plunged deep into those reflections for the pursuance of which I had sought that comparative seclusion. But I had not remained long wrapped up in my reverie when I heard the sounds of voices in very gay and jovial conversation approach; and as one of them instantaneously struck me to resemble that of my brother Robert, though the speakers were still at some little distance, I raised my eyes—and sure enough, beheld him arm-in-arm with his friend Mr. Tomlinson, the manager of the itinerant theatrical troop.

They were both dressed in the richest manner, and were walking with the jaunty air of the finest exquisites. Very different in appearance were they now than when I had seen them at Derby, dressed in their threadbare garments and decorated with the trumpery of theatrical jewellery. Their clothes were not only perfectly new, but cut in the most elegant fashion: they had gold watches and chains—and as each dangled a glove in his hand, the fingers that were thus exposed were perfectly laden with rings. Mr. Tomlinson, who, as the reader will recollect, was a tall portly individual, wore an air so majestic that a stranger might have thought the whole of Piccadilly with the Green Park included belonged to him. My brother looked better than when I last saw him: for though his countenance

still bore certain signs of the early dissipation in which he had plunged, yet there was much less of that low kind of rakishness in his appearance than when we met at Derby. Altogether, Robert had a more genteel air than I should have fancied he could assume: but I cannot say that I experienced any feelings of satisfaction or pleasure at beholding him thus splendidly apparelled—for how was it possible to suppose that he could be pursuing a steady or honest course of life thus to have risen, at all events in appearance, so high above the condition he was in when last I saw him?

As he and Mr. Tomlinson did not immediately see me, but went on talking and laughing in the liveliest strain together, I had a full opportunity thus to notice the wonderful change that had taken place in their exterior: and indeed they were about to pass me by, when rising from my seat, I hurried forward and caught Robert by the hand: for at that moment my misgivings on his account were temporarily forgotten in the natural pleasure that I felt on seeing him.

"Ah, Mary! is that you?" he exclaimed: and quickly surveying me from head to foot, he immediately added, "Well now, really you do look smart to-day!"—for the reader will recollect that I had put on my best things in order to proceed to Wilberton House: at the same time the word *smart* did not properly apply to me; for I was only dressed with neatness, but not with gaiety.

"Your most obedient, Miss Price," said Mr. Tomlinson, lifting off a hat that was all curled at the brims in the French fashion. "It is as delightful as unexpected to encounter you, most beautiful princess, in the midst of this scene o'er which stern winter has spread its cheerless desolating hand."

I bowed slightly to Mr. Tomlinson, and asked Robert how long he had been in London.

"Only five or six weeks," he replied. "But we have been getting on swimmingly—hav'n't we, most worthy friend of mine?"

"Forsooth, have we!" was the manager's pompous reply: and he played with his gold guard-chain with a dramatic stateliness of air. "Set afloat by our own ingenuity on the broad expanse of this metropolitan ocean, with fortune's propitious breezes filling our sails, we have been wafted into the haven of the very best society."

"Drinking champagne, frequenting the theatres, going to dinner-parties and balls, and all that kind of thing," added my brother. "In fact, Mary, we are well up in our stirrups: and if you like I will pay you back the money you lent me at Derby——that is, if you want it: but I know that you are such a careful saving girl that you have already enough of your own."

"I do not want your money, Robert," I answered; "but should be much pleased to learn that you have obtained it——"

"Honestly?" exclaimed Mr. Tomlinson: "that is the word, fair lady, that hovered unspoken upon those red lips of thine. Come, let us seat ourselves—I cannot say beneath the umbrageous covering of this lofty tree, inasmuch as there is not a single leaf upon its boughs; but at all events let us seat ourselves, and we will give you a history of our adventures."

Anxious to hear what had occurred to Robert since I last saw him, and to what circumstances he was indebted for the present seeming brilliancy of his position, I did not refuse to sit down between him and Mr. Tomlinson: but when the latter was resuming his florid jargon, I said to Robert, "Do let me hear from *your* lips whatever you may have to tell me."

"With thee, then, lieutenant of mine," said Tomlinson, "be the task of enlightening thy sister on the subject of her questioning."

"Why, you see, Mary," began my brother, "our theatrical spec at Derby turned out a precious failure. After you left we ran up a fresh bill at the *Shoulder of Mutton:* but how could we possibly settle it, when night after night we played to empty boxes, three or four individuals scattered about in the pit, and half-a-dozen small boys up in the gallery. At no time was the audience more numerous than the troop. Well, Mr. Tibby of the *Shoulder of Mutton* became clamorous for his money——"

"Tripe and gin were stopped," interjected Mr. Tomlinson, extending his arms majestically; "and there was not even confidence sublime enough to furnish such poor refection as bread and cheese."

"What then were we to do?" continued my brother. "The ladies and gentlemen of the company all fell foul of my worthy friend here, vowing that he had deceived them concerning his own popularity in the provinces, and insisting upon his doing something——in plain terms, asking impossibilities. So my worthy friend and I, after consulting together, agreed to bolt and leave the rest of the company in pawn for the bill. We managed to get a few shillings by pledging something: and mounting the top of the coach, we got as far as York. There, taking fresh names—very aristocratic ones, you may depend upon it—we got an engagement at the theatre. All went on pretty well for a month or so; when lo and behold! whom should we one day meet but Miss Araminta Rosina Flummery! She flew at us both like a tigress—but vowing the utmost vengeance against me in particular——"

"Had you deceived her then, Robert, in any way?" I asked.

"Oh, yes! deceived her jollily!" he replied, darting a significant look over his shoulder towards Mr. Tomlinson. "I left her without saying good-bye—and that I suppose was the reason she took it into her head to be so precious savage. Well, there was a deuce of a row in the streets of York—in the middle of the day too; and the consequence was we were all three taken into custody and had up before the justice. When in the presence of his worship, Miss Araminta Rosina actually had the barefaced impudence to swear assault and battery against my worthy friend and me—whereas it was she who attacked us first. The justice believed her, and ordered us both to find bail to keep the peace towards all his Majesty's subjects in general and Miss Flummery in particular. Now there was a great lack of confidence in the Sole Lessee and Manager of the York Theatre; and he refused to bail us. We were accordingly marched off to prison for a month——"

"Good heavens, Robert! you have been in prison?" I exclaimed; and I felt that I turned as white as a sheet.

"Ah! that indeed have I," he answered. "But don't you see, it was for nothing that I had really

done—and for nothing very serious either. Besides, we passed the month comfortably enough: for there were some jolly good fellows of debtors in the prison, and we lodged with them. We smoked and drank, played racquets, and sang songs all day long; and so the month passed away in no time. But when we got out we could not show any more on the York stage; and to increase our vexation we heard that Miss Araminta, by being described as the heroine of a gross, cowardly, and unprovoked assault, had excited universal sympathy—had been taken by the hand by the York manager—and was starring it gloriously on the boards in that city. Again did me and my worthy friend take new names; and thus we made the best of our way to Manchester, where we got an engagement. But there another of the old troop soon turned up and blew upon us; so that we were obliged to decamp. We wandered about from place to place, going through many queer adventures, and being put to some singular shifts; but with which I need not trouble you. At last we resolved to come up to London—that was about six weeks ago—and in a very sad plight was it, I can assure you, that we approached the metropolis. It was between two and three in the afternoon, and we had had nothing to eat all day—that's a fact—isn't it, old boy?"

"It requires no sanctity of an oath to confirm thy statement, friend," was Mr. Tomlinson's magnificent reply.

"Poor Robert!" I murmured, gazing in compassion upon him.

"Well," he proceeded, "wet, tired, and famished, we reached a little public-house about a mile on the outskirt of London; and sitting down on a bench before the door, were deliberating together what the deuce we should do when we got into London. But I can assure you, Mary, that though we tried to put the best face on it, we both looked confounded glum. Presently a gentleman on horseback, attended by a groom, rode up to the public-house, and called for a pint of ale 'in its native pewter,' as he expressed himself. While it was being brought out, he looked at us; and seeing, I suppose, that our condition was not over-blooming, he invited us to drink. More ale was called for; and after a little conversation the gentleman jumped off his horse, tossed the bridle to his groom, and told us to walk into the public-house with him. The parlour was unoccupied; and we three accordingly sat down together. We now had brandy-and-water, and I think cigars too——had we not, most worthy friend?"

"Yes—we puffed the fragrant weed, while quaffing the nut-brown ale," replied Mr. Tomlinson.

"Our new friend," continued Robert, "was a dashing, jovial, good fellow—a regular man about town, and it was evident from something he said that he wanted the assistance of two clever fellows, which he no doubt at the first glance saw that we were. So, as the brandy-and-water and cigars progressed, he entered into explanations. A friend of his was locked up in the King's Bench for a trifle of debt—about two thousand pounds or so; and he wanted to get him bailed before the Judge in Chambers. He accordingly proposed that us two should attend and bail him in due course."

"What is that, Robert?" I asked, having at the time but a dim comprehension of the legal proceeding alluded to.

"It means that the gentleman in difficulties had to give securities, each in four thousand pounds, or the double of his debt, for his appearance when the action should be tried before the Court; and as it was a mere form, of course I and my worthy friend here did not hesitate to become bail under such circumstances."

"But," I exclaimed in astonishment, "surely unless the whole process were an unnecessary mockery, you must have had to prove yourselves worth four thousand pounds each?"

"To be sure," rejoined my brother flippantly: "and so we did."

"Robert, I do not understand you," said I, gazing upon him in utter bewilderment. "How could you prove any such thing, when you know there was no truth in it?"

"Oh!" he ejaculated, "all we had to do was just to make a few representations before the Judge and take our oaths to them."

"And those representations?" I asked tremblingly; for I already suspected that the foul crime of perjury must have been committed.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, Mary! The stories were very innocent ones, and did no one any harm. We only said we were each possessed of large landed estates—one of us in Shropshire, and the other in Buckinghamshire."

"But this was a dreadful falsehood, Robert," I said, with tears in my eyes.

"It certainly was not the exact truth," he answered coolly: "but then we each had a complete new suit of clothes and a hundred guineas between us for the job; and so it was not a very bad day's work. Our friend who picked us up at the public-house, was a man of title and distinction; and he asked us to dine with him and the gentleman that was bailed out. Several other gentlemen were present; and as *they* were not let into the secret that it was all nonsense about our assumed names and imaginary estates, they really took us for what we had passed ourselves off before the Judge; and they paid us very great court indeed, I can assure you. So, through them we actually got introduced into good society, and have kept tip-top company ever since. Two or three of our new friends have lent us money; and if a certain little transaction which we have in hand turns up a trump——"

"Really, Robert," I suddenly exclaimed, "I would rather not hear any more of your proceedings. God help you, my unhappy brother! You are going wrong—dreadfully and dangerously wrong; and I tremble, Oh! I tremble, when I think of it."

I had started up from my seat with considerable excitement, and was clasping my hands in a paroxysm of mingled grief and despair which I could not control.

"What a fool you are, Mary," said Robert sullenly. "You always seem annoyed at everything I do; and now that I am trying to push myself on in the world, it's rather too bad to be talked to in this way."

"Robert," I answered, "if you were pursuing a career of honour and integrity, there is not a being on the face of the earth who would be more sincerely rejoiced than I. But it is different—very different.

You are rushing headlong to ruin! By your own confession you have committed the terrible offence of perjury——"

"Come, enough of this, Mary!" exclaimed Robert, now speaking very fiercely. "I am not to be talked to by you just as if you was my elder sister. I don't demand an account of your actions—you do just as you like——"

"No, Robert—because you appear to be utterly indifferent towards me and William, and Sarah and Jane—just as if there were no such beings in existence. Oh, Mr. Tomlinson!" I exclaimed, in deepest anguish, "I beseech you not to lead my poor brother into these paths which sooner or later must close in ruin."

"Were that appeal delivered on the boards," was the unfeeling response given by the late manager, 'it would draw down thunders of applause. Beautiful Miss Price, you have mistaken your vocation. I told you as much at Derby, when beneath Miss Nibkins' honoured roof I first basked in the sunshine of your eyes."

"Robert," I said, turning away with ill-concealed disgust from my brother's companion, "will you not retract ere it be too late? Oh, I beseech you to pause and reflect, if not for your own sake, at least for that of your brother and your three sisters!"

"Come, let's be off," suddenly exclaimed the unfeeling Robert. "I didn't think when you asked me to tell you my history, that you were going to sermonize over it in this way."

Thus speaking, he hurried abruptly away; and Mr. Tomlinson, lifting his French-fashioned hat with a sort of mock majesty, strode away after my brother. My first impulse was to hasten in pursuit of the misguided Robert, and renew my entreaties that he would turn into another and a better course of life: but I was so overpowered with distress of feeling that my limbs failed me—a

dizziness came over me—and I sank back upon the seat at the foot of the tree. A flood of tears burst from my eyes; and when I grew somewhat composed, neither Mr. Tomlinson nor my brother were any longer in sight.

Ten minutes passed, and I was still sitting in deep tribulation in the Green Park, thinking over all that Robert had told me, and wondering what would eventually become of him, when I was aroused from my reverie by the fresh sounds of footsteps approaching. Looking up, I observed a tall, middle-aged, aristocratic gentleman passing along the gravel walk on the edge of which the tree stood where I was seated. He appeared to be absorbed in thought, and passed by without looking to the right or left. Notwithstanding the preoccupation of my own ideas, and those too of so sorrowful a nature, I could not help being struck by the intellectual character of that gentleman's countenance. There was pride in its expression,—but not so much that haughty and insufferable pride which I had noticed in respect to the aristocracy generally, as the pride which exists in the conscious superiority of intellect. That man appeared to me as enjoying the consciousness of such power; and I know not how it was, but it immediately occurred to me that he was some great personage, such as a Minister or eminent statesman.

While I was still gazing after him with that vacant kind of curiosity which seemed to afford a sort of relief to the distressed feelings that had previously engaged my mind, I noticed that as he drew forth his handkerchief a small red portfolio fell from his pocket. He did not perceive it—but walked on. I immediately flew to the spot, and picked up the portfolio, which was crammed full of papers sticking out at both ends, on one of which my eyes caught sight of the words *Secret Service Money*. I hastened after the gentleman: but he was now walking so rapidly that I could not immediately overtake him. Being too much out of breath with running, I was unable to call out; and he had nearly gained that limit of the Green Park which joins St. James's, ere I succeeded in coming up with him. I touched his arm: he immediately stopped short—turned round—and catching sight of his portfolio, clutched it with a kind of avidity; so that I at once perceived its loss would have been of no small inconvenience, while its recovery was of proportionate consequence.

"A thousand thanks," he exclaimed, with a perfect enthusiasm of gratitude. "But where did you pick it up? how could I have dropped it? You are quite out of breath: you must have been running very fast."

Indeed I was out of breath. I could not immediately speak; and the gentleman waited patiently until I was able to give utterance to a few words of explanation,—telling him how I had seen him drop the portfolio, how far off the incident had occurred, and how I had run to overtake him.

"I will not insult you," he said, "by asking whether you had the curiosity to look into the portfolio: for I see that in your countenance which convinces me you are altogether above such a proceeding."

"I can assure you, sir," was my prompt answer, "that you only do justice to my feelings."

I then curtsied, and was hastening away when he called me back.

"Stop!" he said. "We must not part in this manner. You do not know the service you have rendered me. If these papers had fallen into dishonest hands a very evil use might have been made of them. In plain terms, they are most important State-documents."

"I am delighted, sir," was my response, "that I should have been the means of restoring them to you."

"I see you do not know me," he said, with a sort of half-smile. "But no matter. Fortunately I am possessed of the power to reward a good action. Again I tell you that you have done me a service which I do not attempt to underrate. It would have been the destruction of the Ministry if the papers had got into the hands of an Opposition Member."

These last words he had muttered in a musing manner, but quite audible enough for them to reach my ears: and I pretty well understood their meaning. It was evident that my original suspicion was singularly correct: the gentleman or nobleman—whichever he might be—was clearly one of the Cabinet Ministers.

"Come," he said, "you must permit me to give you some proof of my gratitude for what you have done. You are evidently a very respectable young person; and I shall not offer you money. But if you have any relation in whom you are much interested and who is eligible for any situation suited to his circumstances or position, he shall have it within four-and-twenty hours."

I stammered forth my thanks at this proposition, which came upon me almost with the suddenness and improbability of a dream: but I assured the gentleman that I had no male relative old enough to become the object of his generosity. Then, scarcely had I thus spoken, when my thoughts settled upon Robert—but only for a moment: for how dare I recommend an individual of so bad a character as he? Alas! that I should have been thus compelled to abjure the golden opportunity which thus presented itself for my elder brother: but I could not conscientiously act otherwise.

"The more I see of you," said the Minister, smiling affably, "the more I am pleased with you. How different you are from those, whether male or female, with whom I generally come in contact! *They* are hungering with a cormorant avidity for all kinds of benefits which are *not* offered; while you decline one which is frankly and sincerely placed at your disposal. Come, speak! You surely have a brother, an uncle, a cousin, or some one, to whom I can render a service——or if none of those, perhaps," he added, "there may be one who, although no relation, is yet an object of your regard?"

Though these last words were spoken not merely with courteous urbanity, but with a sort of paternal kindness, the colour immediately rushed to my cheeks: for the image of Eustace Quentin was vividly conjured up before me.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, taking my hand; "now I have got upon the right track. There *is* some one in whom you are thus tenderly interested? Tell me who and what he is. Do not be afraid: I am incapable of asking through any impertinent curiosity. Let this be the proof."

Thus speaking, he drew out his card-case; and

opening it, displayed a name well known to me as that of a nobleman occupying one of the highest posts in the councils of the King.

"My lord," I said, trembling all over with agitation, "I again return you my sincerest—my most grateful thanks——"

"Thanks, my good girl!" he said, smiling. "For what? I have as yet done nothing for you; but I am anxious to do you a service if you will afford me the opportunity. Tell me, then, the name of him in whom you are interested: for I see that there *is* such a happy person in the world."

I hesitated for a moment—blushed again—felt confused, even to dismay; and then mustering up all my courage as the thought of Lord Wilberton's cruel menaces in respect to his son recurred to my mind, I breathed the name of the Hon. Eustace Quentin.

"Indeed!" said the Minister, gazing upon me with evident surprise. "His father Lord Wilberton has only to ask in order to obtain his son's promotion."

"But he will not ask, my lord," I said, now suddenly bursting into tears.

"Oh, I see!" exclaimed the Minister: "some little secret love-affair—eh? Well, it is no business of mine—except indeed, that I shall like to do something to make you happy, not only because I owe you a debt of gratitude, but because you appear to me a good, well-behaved, and ingenuous young person. Come now, have I understood you aright? You desire Mr. Eustace Quentin's promotion?"

"I do, my lord," was my answer, still given tremulously and amidst blushes. "But I do not wish him to know from what circumstance——"

"I understand you," interrupted the Minister. "No one shall know anything about it. It is a secret between you and me—a State secret if you like:"—and he laughed good-humouredly. "Look in the next *Gazette*. And now fare you well."

He took my hand, shook it cordially, and then hurried out of the Green Park, leaving me transfixed with indescribable feelings on the spot where I was standing. He was soon out of sight; and then I hurried away towards Piccadilly. There I obtained a conveyance back to Old Broad Street; and during the hour's ride I thought of nothing but this singular adventure with the Minister. It appeared incredible—altogether a dream. At one moment I fancied that he must have been making sport of me, and that everything which had passed would be retailed as a good joke to Lord and Lady Wilberton, thus aggravating their prejudices against me. But then as I recollected the urbane cordiality of the Minister's manner, and weighed well every word he had uttered, I could no longer entertain a suspicion so injurious to him. Therefore, having reviewed all the details of the adventure, my heart grew elate with hope; and I thought that it would be one of the happiest moments of my life if through my agency my beloved Eustace Quentin should obtain that promotion which his father had so sternly resolved to stop. I knew very well what the *Gazette* meant, and knew also where to look for it in the newspaper: but I did not recollect on what particular days it was published—and on returning to Broad Street there was nobody in the house to whom I could put the question without the fear of being impertinently interrogated in respect to its motive.

It was on a Wednesday that the incidents I have been relating took place. Immediately after breakfast on the following morning I obtained a sight of the *Times* as it lay upon the hall-table in readiness for Mr. Bull when he came down stairs for his own breakfast: but no *Gazette* was there. During that day I wrote a long letter to Eustace, telling him what had occurred between myself and his parents—suppressing however as much as I possibly could in respect to the indignities that I had experienced at the hands of themselves and the Hon. Mr. Ferdinand. I assured Eustace that I should not have mentioned the circumstances to him at all, were it not that I chose to act with the most perfect candour towards him, and that I likewise wished him to express with equal frankness his approval or disapproval of my conduct in the affair. I said nothing relative to my adventure with the Minister; and indeed, whatever the result thereof might be, I resolved to keep my own counsel, it being my fixed determination to do nothing that should in any way seem to assert a selfish claim upon the continued love and fidelity of Eustace. I preferred leaving all this to the unbiassed dictates of his own heart; so that in future, whatever might ensue, I should have no reason for self-reproach.

On taking out my letter to the post, which I obtained an opportunity to do, I entered a newsvender's shop—ostensibly to purchase some periodical, but in reality to find a pretext for satisfying my curiosity concerning the days on which the *Gazette* was published. To the query that I put, I was accordingly informed that the *Gazette* would not appear in the daily newspapers until Saturday morning. This was Thursday: one whole day would intervene ere my suspense would be cleared up relative to the Minister's promise!

CHAPTER LXIII.

LORD AND LADY HARLESDON.

On the following morning, immediately after breakfast was over in the nursery, I was surprised by a visit from Jemima. She embraced me with much affectionate friendship, and told me that the family had come back to town two days previously. I remarked that I thought from her letter, Lord and Lady Harlesdon had intended to remain a longer time at the Park in Derbyshire: to which she replied, "Yes, such was my lord's intention: but business compelled him to return. And now would you believe it, my dear Mary, he has of late become so tender, and affectionate, and kind to our dear lady, that she is quite astonished, and so am I too. I really do not know what to make of it. There is even something pointed in his attentions At times I am very glad to see it, and hope that it is because he feels sorry for his past cruelty. But what makes you look so doubtful and suspicious, Mary?"

I did not answer. The truth was, I had my misgivings that under this altered manner of Lord Harlesdon some new treachery towards his poor wife was intended. But I could not tell Jemima what I thought and apprehended, because it was difficult to touch upon that delicate topic without

showing that I knew more than I chose to reveal.

"I see that you think Lord Harlesdon is not sincere," she resumed, "in his present conduct towards her ladyship; and I myself, though I scarce know why, have entertained a similar suspicion. But let us hope that we may be deceived. There is such a thing in the world as a sorrow for what has passed and a resolution to amend for the future: so perhaps his lordship is influenced by all this. However, the chief object of my coming is to invite you to pass the day with me."

"Impossible, my dear Jemima!" I answered. "I was out the day before yesterday——"

"Oh, but her ladyship has written such a polite note to your mistress, requesting as a personal favour that leave may be granted you. I gave it to the servant down stairs: and so I dare say Mrs. Bull has read it by this time."

Scarcely were these words uttered, when the door was opened and Mrs. Bull made her appearance, enveloped in a new morning wrapper. Her nose looked a great deal redder than even it usually was; and as she approached, her breath exhaled the unmistakable odour of her medicine. She had evidently been taking an early dose.

"Are you the young woman from Lady Harlesdon's?" she said in the most affable manner possible to Jemima: and on receiving the affirmative reply, she went on to observe, "Well, Mary may accompany you with the greatest pleasure on my part. Although I have not the honour of Lady Harlesdon's acquaintance, yet from the polite note which she has written to me I very much desire it; and you may inform her ladyship so. Of course her ladyship is aware that though the citizens and their wives are, generally speaking, not very polished, yet that there *are* some genteel families this side of Temple Bar. Mary," she added, turning to me, "you will not forget to mention to her ladyship that Mr. Bull's canvass of the Ward gets on prosperously: for as her ladyship is so deeply interested in you, of course her ladyship is equally interested in your master and mistress."

Having talked some more nonsense of the same sort, and shown off the airs of her own "fastidious gentility," as she fancied her affectation to be, Mrs. Bull was suddenly reminded by an attack of spasms that she must take another dose of her medicine. She accordingly hurried from the nursery; and Jemima looked at me as much as to say, "What a singular person your mistress is!" I made haste to dress myself in my best apparel; and this being done, I entered the hackney-coach which had brought Jemima to Broad Street, and which she had ordered to wait for us.

"You will be surprised," said Jemima, as we were proceeding along in the lumbering vehicle to the West End, "to hear that Lord Harlesdon is perfectly aware of your coming to the house to-day; and indeed, he of his own accord gave her ladyship a hint that if I liked to see you, I was perfectly welcome to have you to visit me in Grosvenor Square."

"But how did his lordship learn that I was in London?"

"It appears that his lordship happened to mention your name yesterday in the presence of the steward, and the steward told him where you were. So his lordship, when seated in the drawing-room with her ladyship just before retiring to rest, mentioned what I told you; and availing myself of that permission, I got up early this morning and came off to fetch you."

I did not exactly like this fresh piece of intelligence which I had now received of Lord Harlesdon's altered manner. I thought I knew him too well to believe that so singular a change could be based on sincerity; and I was not so frivolously vain as to imagine myself of sufficient consequence to enter for a moment into that nobleman's thoughts, unless it were his intention again to make me the means of ministering unto his vengeance in respect to his wife. But all I had heard rendered me really anxious to see her ladyship: for I knew that she would speak more openly to me upon the change in her husband's conduct than to Jemima.

When the hackney-coach arrived in Grosvenor Square, I received a very kind welcome from the old porter and the other servants who happened to be in the hall at the time. Jemima at once conducted me up-stairs to Lady Harlesdon's own private sitting-apartment; and there I was affectionately greeted by her ladyship. She looked considerably better than when I last saw her, which was at Canterbury two months back. The air of Derbyshire had evidently done her good; and her mind, as I presently found, was more at ease than it had been for a long time past.

"You must leave Mary with me for half-an-hour, Jemima," said her ladyship; "and then she shall be your guest in the nursery for the remainder of the day. I will not monopolize her from you longer than that time."

Jemima accordingly took the hint to quit the room; and when I was alone with her ladyship, she said, "Come and sit near me, Mary: for I hope that I have something to communicate that you will be pleased to hear."

"I shall indeed be delighted, dear lady," was my answer, "to listen to cheering words coming from your lips."

"His lordship's behaviour has undergone a total change towards me," resumed Lady Harlesdon; and she smiled, even radiantly. "But I must tell you how it happened. It was about a month ago, when down in Derbyshire, that his lordship one day entered the boudoir suddenly, and found me weeping. Yes—I was weeping with great bitterness: for it was only on the previous evening that he had said many cuttingly sarcastic things to me in the presence of Dr. Vincent and Lord Miltown. It was so unusual a thing for him to penetrate into my boudoir in the middle of the day, that I really apprehended some fresh manifestation of his dreadful vengeance. But conceive my surprise when he approached, took my hand, and began at once by saying that he was wearied of the life we had been leading—that he was prepared to forgive everything, and throw a complete veil over the past, if I were willing to accept such pardon at his hands and show myself grateful for it. I listened with amazement, and also with incredulity. What? thought I, could this man hitherto so implacable put aside his vengeance all in a moment, as if he were throwing off a garment that hung heavily upon his person—could he change thus suddenly, and yet experience sincerity in that change?

But as I watched his countenance, scrutinizing it with the intensest eagerness to catch the slightest movement of a muscle that might serve to betray any lurking treachery that lay beneath this conciliatory demeanour—and as I hung upon his accents to discover if any poison were mingled with those honied words—I could detect naught to excite the faintest misgiving within me. No: his look—his manner—his words, all indicated sincerity. He saw what was passing in my mind, and observed that it was natural I should receive his conciliatory assurances with mistrust: but he added that he was moved by my resignation, my submissiveness, and my despair—he thought I was sufficiently punished—and apart from these reasons, he himself was wearied of the excitement and the irritability in which he was constantly kept by the pursuance of his vengeance. In short, he said so much to reassure me that I fell at his feet, pressed his hand to my lips, acknowledged how righteously I had suffered, and poured forth my gratitude for the forgiveness which he thus accorded me. Then he sat down by my side, and said that it would not be rational to suppose that he should thenceforth lavish upon me the same endearments as he was wont to bestow in the first few years of our marriage. Indeed, he went on to say that if he were to do so I should not give him credit for sincerity in the reconciliation at all. But he declared that so far as a suitable demonstration of kindness was concerned, it should not be wanting at his hands; and he concluded by expressing a hope that we might henceforth manage to live happily together. His words seemed fraught not merely with sincerity, but also with the most rational spirit. Indeed, I did not see how he could possibly adopt any other line of conduct towards me than that which he had just shadowed forth. I was contented—I was even happy. Again and again did I thank him: again and again did I vow to continue faithful to all my duties as a wife."

"And his lordship has kept his word?" said I, catching the infection of her ladyship's enthusiasm: for she had grown quite enthusiastic as she went on speaking.

"His lordship has more than kept his word," replied Lady Harlesdon. "Instead of treating me with kindness only, he has behaved to me with affection and tenderness. Religiously has he observed his promise to fling a veil over the past—except in two instances; and then he merely alluded to that past in order to give me fresh proofs of his kind intentions for the future. I must mention these two instances. The first was this:—Three or four days ago, when he suddenly informed me that letters relative to that interminable Chancery-suit required his almost immediate attendance in London, and would probably keep him here for the next six weeks—if not altogether till the end of the season—he observed that he felt himself compelled to touch for a moment upon a subject of some little delicacy. He then went on to state that as it was possible Sir Aubrey Clavering might pass a few weeks in London during the winter, as was generally his wont, we should be almost certain to encounter him in society. His lordship accordingly expressed a wish that we might meet Sir Aubrey Clavering on the old footing of friendship, just as if nothing had ever occurred to create unpleasant feelings. Seeing that I hesitated and looked confused, his lordship went on to say that as he had completely forgiven me he had also restored me his fullest confidence, and that he had too strong a faith in my natural generosity of heart not to believe that it would be merely as an acquaintance I should ever again meet Sir Aubrey Clavering. Then his lordship went on to urge that as our reconciliation was complete, an early opportunity should be taken to give before the world as strong a refutation as lay in our power to any little scandalous whisperings which might have circulated; and that this would be best done, not only by meeting Sir Aubrey Clavering in society on the same friendly terms as before—that is to say, to all outward appearance—but likewise by including him as usual in the list of invitations to our parties. In this manner did Lord Harlesdon express his wishes. What could I say? what remonstrance could I offer? Had he not generously forgiven me? was he not essaying by present kindness to compensate for the tyrannies of the past? I therefore felt myself bound to submit to him in all things—especially in a proceeding where he sought to vindicate his own and my honour in the manner that appeared to him most eligible. I accordingly assured him that I bowed to his suggestions."

"And therefore, my lady," said I, "if you meet Sir Aubrey Clavering, you will give him a friendly greeting?"

"There is a gentle remonstrance in your accents, my dear Mary," returned Lady Harlesdon; "and I know what is passing in your mind. You consider it is somewhat indelicate for me to encounter Sir Aubrey Clavering at all—and something that shocks the feeling in the idea that I am ever again, even to outward appearance, to give him the hand of friendship. Ah! and you are right too, Mary, in entertaining such thoughts. But what can I do? I live in an artificial world, which is full of conventionalisms, hypocrisies, duplicities, and deceits; for of all those evil elements is what we call High Life composed. In respect to the course laid down by Lord Harlesdon in case of meeting Sir Aubrey Clavering, we are ruled by the necessity of those conventionalisms. To pass him by unnoticed would be to tell the world that its surmises in respect to him and me are correct: to treat him with only a reserved and distant courtesy, would be to give the same confirmation to those surmises, and at the same time stigmatize my husband as a coward and a drivelling idiot for only partially resenting his dishonour; but to treat Sir Aubrey Clavering with the same outward appearance of cordiality and friendship as heretofore, would be to astound the scandal-whisperers and stamp their assertions as a foul calumny."

"I understand the force of your ladyship's arguments," I observed. "And yet, meseems, apart from the unnatural deceitfulness of this course which his lordship has recommended, there is much danger in it."

"You think perhaps that his lordship's jealousy may be re-awakened," continued Lady Harlesdon: "but it is by no means probable. He trusts to my good feeling, now that he has forgiven me; and as a man of sense he must know that after everything which has occurred, I should be utterly deficient in the spirit of a woman—nay, that I should not even

possess that of a worm—if I were ever to listen again to soft language from the lips of Sir Aubrey Clavering."

"Your ladyship mentioned another instance," said I, "in which Lord Harlesdon delicately alluded to the past."

"Yes: this was in respect to yourself," rejoined her ladyship. "It appears he accidentally learnt from one of the domestics that you were in London; and he said to me last night that he felt he had been guilty of much wrong towards you in Derbyshire, by not only conniving at your being carried off by Sir Aubrey Clavering, but also by in any way allowing you, an innocent young girl as you are, to have your reputation compromised in that affair of the disguised Gipsy Queen. He therefore said that if ever you happened to call at the house, he should at once lay aside all idea of the distinction of rank, and solicit your forgiveness with as much sincerity as if you were the highest lady in the land. He even requested me to tell Jemima that if she liked to invite you hither, she was most welcome. And now, my dear Mary," added Lady Harlesdon, "I have told you everything; and you will admit with me, that these are good tidings which I had to impart."

"Most sincerely do I congratulate you, dear lady," I exclaimed, "upon this change in his lordship's conduct: and most fervently shall I pray to heaven that it may not only have emanated from the best and most generous motives, but also that it may endure unto the end."

"Oh! I have not the slightest doubt of that," cried Lady Harlesdon, in a tone of the fullest confidence. "It would be impossible for any man to simulate such kindness as Lord Harlesdon evinces towards me. I can assure you that at first I myself could scarcely believe in the reality of this change: it appeared to me like a dream—and I sometimes trembled lest treachery lurked beneath. I felt as if I were walking in pathways strown with the choicest and most beautiful flowers, but amidst which I had the intuitive consciousness that a venomous snake was gliding unseen and liable to sting me at any moment. Then too, on those occasion, would I watch Lord Harlesdon's features, unperceived by him, and with the closest scrutiny: but there was naught in his looks to confirm my latent apprehensions. Thus I gradually acquired full confidence; and no single incident—no, not one—has tended to diminish it. By the bye, I must tell you, my dear Mary, that a week before we left Derbyshire his lordship suggested to me that if I would call upon your friends the Percivals, I had not only his full concurrence but that he should even like me to do so. I accordingly availed myself of the suggestion, and am happy to inform you that they are getting on well and prosperously. But this, however, you know, as they told me that they from time to time write you a long letter. Your name, Mary, is a household word with them. If this were an age in which mortal women were worshipped as demi-goddesses, you would be held in such estimation and would have such worship *there*. I must say that your friend Ellen is a very nice young woman, and makes Leonard an excellent wife. He is therefore naturally proud of her, and also adores her. Old Mrs. Baker is as happy as the day is long. I passed two or three hours with them, and imbibed no small amount of satisfaction from the contemplation of the unalloyed bliss of that family."

I was in the midst of expressing my joy and delight at such pleasing intelligence, when the door opened and Lord Harlesdon entered the room. The reader will recollect that when he was first introduced upon the stage of this narrative, I described him as a nobleman with the haughtiest look of aristocratic pride: but never had I seen him so completely amiable and so condescending,—I might almost say kind—in his looks and manner as on the present occasion. It could be by no means easy for a man seventy years of age, whose features had through a long series of years settled as it were into a natural sternness, which expression was enhanced by the wrinkles across the forehead, at the corners of the eyes, and about the lips,—it could not have been easy, I say, for such a countenance to relax into a bland smile unless the heart itself experienced a kindred feeling. Such was the idea that struck me at the time; and therefore I thought Lady Harlesdon was fully justified in placing the utmost reliance upon the sincerity and good faith of her husband in the reconciliation which had taken place between them.

Having said something kind to her ladyship, Lord Harlesdon advanced straight up to me where I stood, having risen from my seat the moment he appeared; and taking my hand, he said, "Mary, I am conscious of deep wrongs towards yourself: but when I declare that I am sorry for the past, I feel assured——"

"My lord," I exclaimed, interrupting him, "I beg that your lordship will not speak another word upon the subject."

"You are a good and generous-hearted girl," he rejoined; "and it was bad indeed of me to seek to do you an injury. However, I take the words you have just uttered as an assurance that you can forget the past. Now sit down, Mary—I know that her ladyship is very much attached to you——sit down, I say:"—and with much apparent good-humour he literally forced me to resume my seat by the side of his wife on the sofa. He himself took a chair, and went on to say, "I hope you are happy in your new place: but if not, and her ladyship wishes to have you again with her, I shall be very glad. Indeed, I should like you to return, so that I might have an opportunity of convincing you that I am truly sorry for any injury I may have done you in times past."

"Mary and I will talk it over presently," said her ladyship, perceiving that I was somewhat confused by the proposition: for at the time I scarcely knew what answer to make, and at least thought it was a subject which required some consideration.

"Very well," said his lordship. "Of course Mary can do as she pleases. Do you not think her ladyship is looking better than she was?" he asked: "for I know that you saw her at Canterbury on our return to England."

"Yes—I told his lordship the other day that I saw you there," observed Lady Harlesdon.

"I certainly think that her ladyship is looking much better, my lord," was my response to the nobleman's question; "and I sincerely hope that her ladyship's health will continue to improve."

"Yes—I must have her get quite well," said Lord Harlesdon, looking kindly upon his wife.

"It will not be my fault," he added pointedly, "if her ladyship does not regain her good looks altogether in a very short time."

After a little more conversation, in the course of which Lord Harlesdon dropped several hints to make me aware that he was thoroughly and completely reconciled to his wife, and that he meant to study her happiness for the future as the only way of obtaining peace and tranquillity for himself, I rose and went up to the nursery. There I was gladly welcomed by the children; and when I and Jemima had an opportunity of conversing together, our discourse speedily turned upon a subject interesting to herself.

"I wrote and told you," said I, "how by a strange coincidence your false Prince de Chantilly turned out to be none other than my master, the equally false Count de Montville."

"And now, my dear Mary," exclaimed Jemima, "you must give me every particular concerning him. Oh! the base swindler, to have taken me in as he did!"

I accordingly gave Jemima in full detail all those particulars relative to the French adventurer with which the reader is acquainted, and which, at the time they occurred, I had sketched in a letter to Jemima. She could not help inveighing with much bitterness against him—not on account of the money of which he had robbed her, as on account of the deceit he had practised in a more tender point of view.

"Believe me, my dear Mary," she added, "I am perfectly cured of my foolish predilection for mustaches; and I never think now, even in my dreams, of marrying a Prince. If all the Gipsy Queens in the world were to prophecy for me the most brilliant destinies, I should not believe them. And now tell me, what think you of this reconciliation between my lord and her ladyship?"

"I cannot entertain so bad an opinion of human nature," was my answer, "as to believe that it is otherwise than perfectly sincere. I feel convinced that it is; because Lord Harlesdon is not the man to be able to affect sentiments of generosity, kindness, and tenderness without really feeling them."

"I am glad to hear you express such an opinion," exclaimed Jemima: "for at one time it made me so miserable to see her ladyship constantly suffering, and weeping, and pining, that I could not endure the sight and meant to leave. But now I shall stay."

"What should you think, Jemima, if I were to tell you that his lordship has asked me to come back and resume my old situation?"

"Is it possible?" cried the good-hearted young woman. "Oh! I should be so pleased! and the dear children too would be so delighted! Of course you will accept the offer: for I am sure you cannot like being in the service of those odious Bulls. What I saw of Mrs. Bull this morning was quite enough for me."

I answered that her ladyship intended to speak to me again upon the subject of coming back into her service, and that I should then decide upon the step to be taken. I passed a very happy day with Jemima and the children; and in the evening Lady Harlesdon sent for me to a parlour where she was seated alone, and resumed the topic last alluded to.

"It would give me the utmost pleasure to return to your ladyship's service," said I: "but there is one reason which makes me hesitate."

"I have already penetrated your thoughts," she observed. "You are afraid of encountering Sir Aubrey Clavering?"

"I feel, my lady, that I ought not, out of respect for myself, to incur even the risk of meeting him."

"I not only appreciate your motives, Mary, but honour them. At the same time, recollect that if Sir Aubrey Clavering should ever come to the house again, it will not be to stay as a visitor, but merely as a transitory guest at a dinner-party or ball—on which occasion you would not have the slightest chance of meeting him."

"Under those circumstances, my lady," said I, "it is impossible to refuse your kind offer. But not to behave unhandsomely towards my present mistress, it will be requisite to give a month's notice there. This I can do in the course of a day or two, when the current month will have expired."

"Then, in a month, Mary, I shall expect you to return beneath this roof. I see, my dear girl, that you have upon your finger the little memorial I gave you for your noble conduct in respect to Isabella. The circumstance of your wearing that ring convinces me that you entertain an affection towards me; and therefore I shall be truly delighted to have you again about me."

I thanked her ladyship for these assurances, and took my leave of her. I then bade farewell to Jemima and the children, and hastened back to Old Broad Street.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE MISS BULLS' LOVE-AFFAIRS.

On the following morning I obtained possession of the *Times* newspaper the moment it was left at the house; and turning to the *Gazette*, ran my looks with eager anxiety and suspense over the list of names congregated under the head of "War Office." Ah! what an electric thrill of joy shot through my heart, as my eyes rested on the following paragraph:—

"—th Regiment. Lieutenant the Hon. Eustace Quentin, to be Captain, without purchase."

The Minister had kept his word, and he whom I loved had through me received promotion. He was now a Captain—and despite his father's evil intentions also! How astonished his parents and brother would be! But was it not certain that Lord Wilberton would at once hurry off to the official residences to inquire into the circumstance? Would the Minister explain the meaning thereof? No: I felt assured he would not: he had promised that the secret should rest between himself and me; and as he had so faithfully kept his word in one sense he was not likely to violate it in another. But even if he did, what mattered it? No blame could be attached to me. On the contrary, would not the whole transaction afford a proof of that sincere and disinterested love which I experienced for Eustace Quentin? At the same time it was my wish, for the reasons already explained to the reader, that

the origin of this promotion should remain enveloped in mystery—at least for the present.

Assuredly it was one of the happiest moments of my life when I beheld that notification in the *Gazette*. Hurrying up to the nursery I could not help giving vent to my joy in a flood of tears: for even joy itself may fill the heart to a degree which can find no other vent than through the same avenues whence the fulness of grief likewise escapes. I sought an immediate opportunity to pen a letter to the Minister, expressing my grateful thanks for the remembrance which he had bestowed upon the humble individual who thus addressed him; and I ventured delicately to remind his lordship of his promise that the whole transaction should be kept a secret.

In a few days I received a letter from Eustace Quentin, who was still in the North of Ireland, in reply to the one I had written detailing all that had occurred at Wilberton House. At the time he wrote, the intelligence of his promotion had not reached him. His letter was most tender and affectionate. He asked me how he could do otherwise than approve of my conduct towards his parents; but he assured me, with numerous protestations of continued fidelity, that he never had repented and never *could* repent of having formed an engagement with me. "At the same time, my dear Mary," he went on to say, "I fully and deeply appreciate all that is noble and generous in the proposition you made to my parents to sacrifice yourself for me: but never, never, dearest girl, will that sacrifice be demanded at your hand. On the contrary, you would consummate my wretchedness and plunge me into despair if you even thought me capable of vacillating in the attachment I experienced for you. No; my love forms a part of my very being; and if I do not now urge our immediate alliance, it is only out of respect to your own feelings. But believe me, it will be the happiest and brightest day in my existence when I can persuade you to give me your hand."

I pressed the dear letter to my lips, and shed tears of gladness upon it. Two or three days afterwards, I received another letter from Eustace, in which he wrote as follows:—

"A joyous but most unaccountable incident has occurred, I am promoted to the rank of Captain! The intelligence has just reached me. But it is *without purchase*, and therefore totally independent of my father's money or interest. I cannot understand it. A letter from the Secretary at War, which accompanies the usual document, tells me that my promotion is a reward for my general good conduct in my regiment. But this I know to be a mere complimentary excuse. Promotion is *not* granted for such reasons to those who by their position and circumstances may be held competent to obtain a step in rank *by purchase*. There is some mystery in the matter, which I cannot clear up. But now, dear Mary, with my pecuniary means thus increased, may I venture to hope that you will say the one word which is to render me happy?"

Captain Quentin proceeded to urge me in the most affectionate and endearing manner to give my immediate consent to our union. He said that if I would do so he could procure leave of absence and come to London for the purpose of making me his wife; and he concluded his letter by expressing the most heartfelt hope that I would throw no farther obstacle in the way of our marriage. Ah! reader can you not enter into the feelings which now swelled in my bosom? Happiness was within my reach: and yet *again* did a sense of duty prompt me to a farther self-sacrifice!

"If I at once agree to Eustace Quentin's proposal," thought I, "how can I acquit myself of a prophetic selfishness in asking for this promotion on his account? Besides, even with the pay of a Captain he has not enough to maintain his rank and position as the son of a Peer of England. Fortune has been hitherto so far favourable as to make me the means of rendering Eustace a service at the moment when his own father was endeavouring to work him an injury. Must I not trust to this same good fortune to throw down all the barriers that at present oppose our union? May I not hope that his parents will sooner or later relent? More improbable things have happened in the world. If any one had told me a fortnight back that I should become the means of raising Eustace a step in his profession, I could not have possibly believed such a prediction—and yet it *has* taken place! Ah, and I attributed it to fortune! No, it was to Providence—and heaven itself in its own good time will ensure our happiness."

I sat down and penned a long letter to Eustace, congratulating him on his promotion, but declaring that it effected a very slight change in the circumstances and the motives which had prompted me when we met at Ashford to urge the necessity of delay in respect to our marriage. I begged him not to mistrust my love in thus beseeching him to pause yet awhile ere he took a step which would perhaps render the breach altogether permanent between himself and his parents. I reminded him that we were both very young—that we were well assured of each other's constancy—and that in the peculiar circumstances of our relative position, it would be far more satisfactory to my feelings to wait awhile in the hope that his parents would relent, rather than hurriedly rush into a family every member of which, save *one*, would treat me with scorn, hatred, and contempt. Much more did I say, couching my arguments in the tenderest and most affectionate terms, and imploring Eustace still to be guided by me in the counsel that I offered. Anxiously did I watch for the return of post; and the letter which it brought afforded another proof of Captain Quentin's pure and constant love: for it signified his wish to meet my views in all things, and that he consented to a short delay, so that we might trust to our good fortune and see what the chapter of accidents would turn up in our favour.

I had duly intimated to Mrs. Bull my intention to withdraw from her service at the end of the month. She was at first inclined to be very angry; but when she heard that I had an opportunity of returning to my old place in Lady Harlesdon's service, she immediately became most amiable, saying that she would not stand in the way of her ladyship's wishes for all the world, and enjoining me not to forget to let her ladyship know that she had said so. She added that although it was an unpleasant thing to be constantly changing servants, especially when they suited, yet she knew a great many genteel families who were frequently compelled to submit to such annoyances.

Mr. Bull succeeded in his election, and became Alderman of his Ward. If the principal qualifica-

tion of a City magistrate consists, as I believe it does, in being able to play a famous game with the knife and fork, Mr. Bull was certainly as eligible a candidate as could possibly have stepped forward; and under such circumstances the liverymen of his Ward did themselves the highest honour and proved faithful to all their antecedents by electing him. Nothing could exceed the airs which Mrs. Bull now gave herself. She spoke of her husband only as "the Alderman." When she came down of a morning her first question was, "Is breakfast ready? You know the Alderman has to be at Guildhall presently." At mid-day it was, "Has the Alderman come in yet to lunch?" At dinner-time she would ring the bell with frantic violence, demanding of the servant who answered the summons, "whether the Alderman had gone up to his dressing-room?" At tea-time and at supper there were fresh excuses for dinning "the Alderman" in the ears of all the domestics. In fact no opportunity was lost of making the most of "the Alderman." As for the Miss Bulls, they appeared much less elated with their father's success than might have been expected. Not but that they were glad: yet they appeared to be too much pre-occupied with certain little affairs of their own to enter with the same spirit as their mother-in-law into whatsoever advantages were to be derived from their father's civic rank. They were constantly whispering together on the staircase, the landings, and in their own chamber. If ever I happened to have occasion to enter their room, I was tolerably sure to find the two young ladies in close and earnest conversation. But I was at no loss to conjecture the cause of this behaviour on their part. The names of Captain Wimbledon and Mr. Cavendish afforded the clue to the reading of the mystery.

One morning—about ten days after Alderman Bull's election, and within three or four of the expiration of the month—I happened to be coming

down stairs at the instant when the postman's well known double knock echoed through the house. I at once went to the door to save the housemaid the trouble of answering it.

"Alderman Bull, Mrs. Bull, and Miss Mary Price," said the postman, hurriedly turning over a quantity of letters and specifying the names to which they were addressed: then thrusting the packet of correspondence into my hand, he sped away.

The next moment the elder Miss Bull came rushing down the stairs, and stopping me just as I was about to enter the breakfast-parlour with the letters, she said in a low quick voice, but with very excited manner, "Let me look at them for an instant."

I gave her all the letters save the one addressed to myself, and the handwriting of which, I should observe, was altogether unknown to me.

"What is that letter you have got in your hand?" she asked with increasing excitement.

"It is for me, Miss," I said, and at once put it into my pocket.

Miss Bull appeared confounded. She turned pale as death, gazing upon me with a sort of vacancy and terror which actually frightened me. Then she appeared to gasp, as if endeavouring to give utterance to words which literally stuck within her throat. Not knowing what to think of all this, and feeling pained as well as embarrassed by the scene, I took from her hand the letters which I had given her a moment before, and at once went into the parlour.

"Correspondence for the Alderman?" said Mrs. Bull, who had apparently been troubled with a recurrence of her spasms; for she was in the act of pouring some of her medicine into her tea at the moment I entered.

I laid all the letters on the table, and then quitted the room. Miss Bull was loitering in the hall: but at the very moment that I thus issued forth, the parlour-maid appeared with a tray of cold viands which she was carrying into the breakfast-parlour. So Miss Bull could not speak to me then, as she evidently wanted to do; and I hurried up-stairs. I heard Miss Bull come bounding after me; and now the suspicion flashed to my mind that the letter which I had in my pocket, though addressed to me, was in reality intended for her. This thought filled me with indignation. Was it possible that notwithstanding the peremptory refusal I had given some time back to allow any correspondence to be directed under cover to me, such an unwarrantable liberty had nevertheless been taken with my name? I really felt at the moment anxious to punish Miss Bull for her conduct if she had really been guilty of so gross an impropriety. Therefore I remained deaf to her mingled entreaties and commands that I would stop as she pursued me up the stairs; and on reaching the nursery I darted in, locking the door in her face. The little children were quite frightened at the proceeding; and Miss Bull through the key-hole besought and implored me to admit her.

Heeding neither the children nor their sister-in-law, I drew forth the letter from my pocket, and now perceived that there was a small cross made in one corner. The object of that mark was clear enough: it was to show that notwithstanding the letter was addressed to me, it was in reality intended for the Miss Bulls. I however tore it open, considering that under the circumstances there was no sanctity in such correspondence. The envelope contained two letters—and the first which met my view was addressed to the elder Miss Bull. Hastily running my eyes over its contents, I found them to be as follow:—

"Thursday Evening.

"Everything is arranged, angel of my heart! To-morrow night at eleven o'clock the carriage-and-four will be in readiness in Finsbury Circus. We have chosen that spot as being most secluded from observation, and yet the nearest convenient one to your abode. At eleven, then, adored one of my soul—miracle of beauty that thou art—shall I clasp thee in my arms: and then away, away with lightning speed to Gretna! Oh, the love and the romance that are blended in all this!

"Ever thine until death,

"EUGENIUS WIMBLEDON."

The second billet was directed to Miss Lydia: but the instant I caught sight of that address, I started, and an ejaculation escaped my lips—for it at once struck me that the writing was familiar. Yes—it was so beyond the possibility of doubt: for if I could not judge by the few words of the address on the outside of the note, I was able to do so by the greater quantity of writing inside. The contents of this latter note were as follow:—

"Thursday Evening,

"Beloved and adored Lydia,

"As my esteemed friend the gallant Captain Wimbledon informs your amiable sister, everything is arranged; and to-morrow night at eleven o'clock we shall meet, to part no more! Think of me in the interval, my adored one—even as I think of you. I waft you a million kisses on ambrosial gales.

"Your sincere lover, and soon to be

"Your devoted husband,

"CONSTANTINE CAVENDISH."

"Now," said I to myself, "I know how to act:"—and I restored the two notes to their envelope.

During the couple of minutes which had elapsed while I was perusing these billets, Miss Bull had never ceased talking through the key-hole, entreating me in the most piteous manner to open the door. I now did so—and she rushed in. The first glance showed her that I had opened the letter, and a flush of indignation crimsoned her countenance: then she became pale as death—and snatching the packet from my hand she hurried to the window, where turning her back towards the children, she scanned each little billet.

"Mary," she said, abruptly addressing me, but speaking in a low and agitated voice, "you have read these letters, and I and Lydia are at your mercy. You will tell our father?"

"No," I answered: "it is not my intention to make such mischief between a parent and his daughters."

"Then you will tell mother-in-law?" said Miss Bull, her features somewhat brightening up.

"No—because Mrs. Bull would tell your father; and if I wished him to know it, I had better tell him myself."

"Oh! you are a good girl, Mary—a dear good girl after all!" said Miss Bull, seizing me by the hand and pressing it with effusion. "Then you will not betray us? you will hold your tongue concerning what you have read?"

"It will be your fault, Miss, if your father or mother-in-law become aware of your conduct," was my answer.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, surveying me with anxiety and suspense. "You have some concealed intention—you meditate something—there is an unnatural coldness in your manner——"

"Your breakfast is ready, Miss—and you had better go down to it."

"Well, I will come up to you again presently," she said with hasty excitement. "But pray, for heaven's sake, don't betray poor Lydia and myself. It would be the death of us! And do prevent that boy," alluding to Theodore, "from letting the secrets out to his mamma."

"I will certainly endeavour to do so," was my rejoinder.

Miss Bull then quitted the nursery; and I coaxed the child not to say anything of what he had just seen to his mother. I knew how to humour him, and felt assured that he was won over to silence, at least for the present. If on any future occasion he should let out what he had seen, I did not much care, so long as I could keep him quiet until I had time to put in execution the plan I had formed.

In the course of an hour the two Miss Bulls came up into the nursery. Both of them looked, I thought, particularly foolish, and eyed me with mingled apprehension and suspense. That they were really in such a rage they could have devoured me, there can be no doubt; and it must have been gall and wormwood to them to be thus compelled to maintain a civil and even humble demeanour.

"Come, Theodore—and you too, Georgy," along with me," said Lydia. "I have got some pictures and some sugar-plums to give you. Mary will let you go with me for a few minutes."

I offered no objection, although I saw it was a mere subterfuge on the part of Miss Lydia to afford the elder Miss Bull an opportunity of speaking with me alone. Lydia accordingly took the two children out of the nursery; and the moment the door had closed behind them, the elder Miss Bull said, "Now, Mary, do tell me what course you mean to adopt: for I know you well enough to be assured you will do something."

As she spoke she seemed in a complete state of trepidation, and her heart was fluttering so that I could positively hear its beatings.

"I have already promised you," said I, "that I will not betray you to your father and mother-in-law, and I mean to keep my word."

"But that is not enough! It leaves me in the cruellest state of suspense," she immediately replied. "Of course you see how Lydia and I are situated with these two gentlemen. What are we to do? how are we to act? It is you now who must decide. Oh, Mary! if we could only enlist you in our service, how happy should we be! But you are offended on account of our having our letters directed to you. Well, but you see that we took measures to enable us to distinguish whatsoever letters were in reality intended for us, so that we might never incur the risk of violating your own private correspondence. Look—this cross in the corner was the sign agreed upon."

"But, Miss Bull," I said, "you are not accustomed to answer the front-door and therefore you must have induced the other servants to place in your hands all letters addressed to me?"

"No—or else we should have had the letters addressed under cover to one of the other servants. I can assure you that either I or Lydia have constantly watched the postman's coming—and when the parlour-maid or housemaid have answered the door, we have instantly taken the letters——Indeed," she added, hurriedly, "it was because the letters were thus first taken in by them that we did not have them directed to either one of those servants—and as for trusting them, it was out of the question. But you see, Mary, that you yourself are in no way compromised——"

"I am certainly pleased from being saved from implication in such a proceeding," said I. "But what did these persons say—Captain Wimbledon and Mr. Cavendish, I mean—when you arranged with them to direct their letters to *me?*"

"Oh! I recollect—they evidently thought it very odd, and the moment your name was mentioned, they appeared quite confused. But they said it was only because they had heard of your famous adventure at Derby, and were therefore struck by the coincidence that you should now be in pa's service. However, I forget all they said—for I was much flurried at the time——"

"And of course," said I, "they never offered to visit you at the house?"

"No—because pa took such a hatred to them."

"And did they advise you to make a confidante of me?" I asked.

"Quite the contrary. They begged and implored that you should be kept in entire ignorance of everything—because, they said, it was evident from all that had transpired of your character, you would not lend yourself to anything that was going on."

"They judged me rightly," I thought to myself.

"But why do you ask all these questions, Mary?" continued Miss Bull, still in a complete flutter of agitation. "Do you know anything of Captain Wimbledon and Mr. Cavendish? But no—of course you cannot. And now, pray don't be angry at what has been done. You see I have treated you with the utmost frankness—you are entirely in the secret—and you will not betray us? The truth is," she added, colouring and looking remarkably foolish as well as endeavouring to be most coaxingly polite, "Lydia and I——don't look so serious, Mary——Lydia and I love these two elegant gentlemen—our happiness depends on marrying them——"

"Unknown to your father," I observed.

"Yes—this is true, because pa has taken such a silly dislike to them. But then pa is so unreasonable—you know he is—he does everything for contradiction's sake. I am sure a nicer man than Captain Wimbledon or a genteeler one than Mr. Cavendish cannot exist. If you only saw them you would think so. Now observe, Mary, as I and Lydia are both of ago our actions cannot be controlled; and we might leave the house directly if we liked—not even pa, though he is an Alderman, could stop us. Special licenses could be got, and we might be married in a few days. So you see nothing can or need prevent us."

"Then why this intended flight to Gretna Green?"

I asked, struck with the truth of all Miss Bull's observations.

"Oh! that dear fellow, Captain Wimbledon, suggested it," she replied; "and Lydia and I were quite charmed with the idea. It is so romantic! All the City girls will be bursting with envy and spite when they hear of it. Besides, don't you see—it guards us against the chance of any unpleasant intrusion on the part of pa in case he should discover what is going on. If we arrange to get married by special license, he might suddenly pop in upon us at the church, and do or say something to stop the proceedings: but if we get a whole night's start of him we are sure to be at Gretna first, even if he should take it into his head to follow us. You see, Mary, I am telling you everything; and now as you are our confidante, I hope you will assist us. But you are so very particular—you are unlike any other young person I ever knew."

"Miss Bull," I said, after a few moments' reflection, "I will accompany you this evening."

"You, Mary!" she exclaimed in mingled astonishment and joy. "Will you indeed? is it possible?"

"I will indeed," was my rejoinder. "You must therefore make an arrangement with the housemaid or parlour-maid to come and stop with the children."

"What! make a confidante of either of them?" cried Miss Bull.

"Yes—it is absolutely necessary."

"Then it shall be the housemaid. And after all," continued Miss Bull, in a reflecting manner, "it will not be so difficult, or yet so dangerous: for I need not say a word to her till pretty near the last moment—and then a five-pound note will secure her services, I am sure. Well, Mary, it shall all be done as you suggest. And, oh! how delighted I am, and how happy Lydia will be!"

Miss Bull threw her arms round my neck, and embraced me with a great show of affection. She then hurried off to tell her sister the good news; and in a few minutes they returned to the nursery together, bringing back the children with them. Lydia took an opportunity to press my hand with every appearance of cordial warmth; and I have no doubt that at the moment both the sisters felt well enough disposed towards me, now that they believed I was entering fully into their plans.

Nothing of any consequence occurred during the remainder of the day—unless it were that Mrs. Alderman Bull, as she now called herself, had so many attacks of spasms and was compelled to have such frequent recourse to her medicine that she was forced to go to bed immediately after dinner. I subsequently learnt from the parlour-maid, who had to help her up-stairs, that she was in a thorough state of intoxication; and I must candidly confess that, all things considered, I was by no means displeased at the prospect of quitting my present place at the expiration of a few days.

I put the children to bed that evening at the usual hour; and they soon fell asleep. The Miss Bulls, who had been up to the nursery several times during the day, no doubt to convince themselves that I was still in the same mind about accompanying them on their Gretna Green expedition, paid me another visit between nine and ten o'clock; and they then asked me pointedly if I still purposed to accompany them? I answered in the affirmative; whereupon they told me that they had made everything right with the housemaid, and that as their mother-in-law had gone to bed and their pa would not be long in following her (he himself having done such ample justice to the bottle after dinner that he would be completely "settled" by his allowance of brandy-and-water at supper) there was no apprehension to be entertained of any impediment in making our egress from the house. I accordingly promised to be ready at a quarter to eleven, at which time the Miss Bulls were to come up to the nursery and fetch me.

It was a little more than half-past ten when the housemaid joined me; and having convinced herself that the children slept soundly, she said in a mysterious whisper, "Well, Mary, isn't this a bit of fun? How astonished the Alderman and missus will be when they come down in the morning and find the birds flown! I wish I was going with young missuses: but they have behaved very handsome to me, and so I needn't complain. What fun you will have! You will see the blacksmith-parson who splices a pair of lovers just as cleverly as he shoes a horse. What a man he must be!"

This last reflection appeared to open a wide field for the rangings of the housemaid's fancy: for she sat in a deep reverie, while I hastened to put on my bonnet and cloak and wrap myself well up, it being a bitter cold night, in the middle of winter.

"Missus has gone up to bed so how-come-you-so she couldn't walk," observed the housemaid, arousing from her reverie. "She gets worse and worse every day. To my knowledge that medicine-bottle of her's was filled three times since breakfast this morning, let alone the bottled porter and cherry-brandy at lunch, and the wine at dinner. But old master has took to drinking more than ever since he has been an Alderman. He has just gone up so top-heavy that he grumbled at the stair carpet the whole way, declaring it hadn't been put down properly and was enough to trip any man up. When he got as far as the first landing he insisted that all the flooring was loose and made him so unsteady he could hardly stand. But here is young missuses!"

The housemaid had heard them approaching with stealthy steps; and now the door, opening cautiously, gave them admittance. They were both wrapped up with cloaks, shawls, and furs; and each carried a little parcel of necessaries for the toilet during the journey.

"Oh, Mary is ready!" they both said in the same breath: then the elder Miss Bull, speaking to the housemaid, observed, "You must come down and bolt the street door behind us."

"No—don't do that," I said: "for suppose that by any chance there should be a disappointment and we might want to get back again into the house. Let the street door remain unbolted; and we will take the key with us."

"But what disappointment can there possibly be?" asked Miss Lydia, somewhat petulantly.

"There are risks in everything," I replied calmly. "Suppose that the gentlemen should not be there—or that there is a mistake relative to the hour or the night——"

"Well," interrupted the elder Miss Bull, "we can but follow Mary's advice: so the street-door

need not be bolted. Come along—there's not a minute to lose."

"A pleasant journey, Miss—and to you also, Miss Lydia," said the housemaid, as the two ladies wished her farewell.

The Miss Bulls and I then crept silently down stairs—not that there was much chance of disturbing the Alderman and his wife, considering the circumstances under which they had both retired to rest. We reached the hall without molestation; and I took very good care to secure the key of the street-door about my person. We issued forth as noiselessly as possible, and began making the best of our way by the shortest cuts towards Finsbury Circus. The two sisters walked together, I following close behind. Little was spoken between them; and I said not a word. In about ten minutes we reached the place of appointment.

"There's the carriage!" immediately ejaculated the elder sister.

"With the lamps lighted," added Miss Lydia. "And I can see the four horses. Noble creatures!" she added in a sentimental mood: "little do they suspect the errand of love on which they are to bear us along."

"Here they are, rushing to meet us!" said Elizabeth Bull, as two tall cloaked figures, suddenly emerging from the obscurity behind the rays of the carriage-lamps, came hurrying forward towards us. "Dearest Eugenius!" murmured Miss Bull, as she was clasped in the arms of Captain Wimbledon.

"Adored Constantine!" tenderly whispered the sentimental Lydia, as she at the same time was strained to the breast of Mr. Cavendish.

"Yes—I was not mistaken," thought I to myself as I witnessed this scene: and I now trembled all over with excitement—for I was about to dash the golden bowl of hope to the ground and shiver it to atoms.

"Come, my best-beloved, my adored one!" said Captain Wimbledon. "The carriage is in attendance—the postilions are mounted—the horses are pawing the ground with impatience—and I, my princess, am ready to bear thee away on the wings of love?"

"Yes—don't let us delay," said Mr. Cavendish to Lydia. "Cherished being of my soul! a rosy-tinted future stretches before us. But I say," he suddenly exclaimed, as he caught sight of me where I stood in the background; and his voice had changed all in a moment to accents of uneasiness. "Who's that you've got with you? An attendant?"

"Is she faithful? bears she the stamp of trustworthiness upon her brow?" demanded Captain Wimbledon, also in a somewhat nervous manner: and through the obscurity of the night the two gentlemen's eyes were fixed keenly and penetratingly upon me—but they could not immediately distinguish my countenance, though it was tolerably clear they had an uneasy presentiment who I was.

Nor did I leave them long in doubt upon the subject; but raising my voice, I said, "You ask whether I am faithful? Yes—too faithful to the cause of honour and truth to permit this proceeding to go any farther."

"Perdition! this was what I apprehended all along!" exclaimed the self-styled Mr. Cavendish, as he at once knew my voice.

"Yes—'tis she!" muttered Captain Wimbledon, as I stood forward so that the light of a street-lamp fell upon my features.

But the two Miss Bulls, little suspecting the real cause of my suddenly pronouncing against them, but naturally supposing that I had meant to play them false all along, turned round upon me with enraged looks.

"Vile treacherous girl!" said the elder sister in bitterest accents: "it is too late! You can do nothing now: we are our own mistresses—and we defy you!"

"Yes—we defy you. Begone!" cried Miss Lydia. "And now let us away!" she added, appealing to her lover.

"No," I said firmly and decisively: "you will both return to your father's house. Painful as my position is, I am nevertheless fulfilling a duty. I do not wish to say a word more than is necessary. Let it suffice then for me to assure you, Miss Elizabeth—and you too, Miss Lydia—that the names of those to whom you would have entrusted yourselves are *not* Wimbledon and Cavendish—nor are they what they have represented themselves."

The two sisters turned their looks in dismay upon Mr. Tomlinson and my brother; for these indeed were Captain Wimbledon and Mr. Cavendish! But the air of mingled confusion and disappointment which both of them wore, was but little calculated to reassure the Alderman's two foolish daughters.

"Well, Robert, I suppose it's all up?" exclaimed Mr. Tomlinson. "A storm has gathered—the cloud has broken—and the thunder has burst above our heads. Come, let us be off."

"By Jove!" ejaculated my brother, "I will be revenged for this!"—and he gnashed his teeth with rage as he threw a terrible look upon me.

The two Miss Bulls screamed with affright; and Mr. Tomlinson, doubtless fearing that the neighbourhood would be alarmed, and perhaps the intervention of the police-authorities put into request, suddenly took to his heels, closely followed by my brother Robert.

"Now away home, ladies!" said I, in a hurried voice: for your cries have already brought people to their front doors."

Such was indeed the case; and recalled by the circumstance to the necessity of displaying their presence of mind, the sisters followed me rapidly away from Finsbury Circus.

"What in heaven's name, Mary, does all this mean?" demanded the elder Miss Bull, in a voice almost choking with rage and spite as we relaxed our pace in one of the streets leading homeward.

"It means that I have saved you both from taking a step which you would have repented for all the rest of your lives."

"Then who are those persons? why did you do this? how did you know them?" inquired both the ladies, speaking with nervous excitement and as it were with the same breath.

"I have seen them before—I know them well," was my equally hurried response; "and they are far—very far—from being what you fancied them. Alas! that I should have to say so," I murmured to myself, tears trickling down my cheeks: for the image of my unhappy and misguided brother was uppermost in my thoughts.

"What is that you were saying?" inquired Miss Lydia sharply.

"Oh! what's the use of questioning her any further?" exclaimed the elder sister. "What she says must be correct, from the conduct of those two deceitful men themselves. Oh, Lydia! how could you ever have been so blind?"

"I blind?" echoed the younger lady. "You are a fool, Elizabeth: it was you who led me on."

"It wasn't—it was you that over-persuaded me. Oh! I could cry my eyes out with vexation!"

"And I could tear the eyes of those deceitful wretches out," added Miss Lydia.

In this manner did they go on exchanging excited remarks until we reached Broad Street; and then I reminded them that it would be prudent to hold their tongues as we stole back into the house.

"But one word, Mary," said Miss Bull, suddenly stopping short. "Why, if, you knew those men to be mere adventurers, did you not tell me so before? Some weeks have elapsed since I first mentioned their names to you——"

"Yes—but under those assumed names I did not recognise them," was my answer. "It was only when that letter came this morning that I at once discovered the mystery: for the hand-writing of one of the notes was familiar to me."

"Then why did you let matters go so far?" inquired Miss Bull. "Why did you suffer us to be made such fools of?"

"Because I perceived how infatuated you were," I explained; "and I knew full well that if I had said anything against those persons you would not credit me. So I resolved to unmask them in your presence and thus place their real characters beyond the possibility of doubt in your estimation. What I did has been done for your sake, and with the best possible motives. Indeed, I can assure you," I added, "that it has cost me a pang to be compelled to act in such a manner."

I was thinking of my brother as I thus spoke: but of course the Miss Bulls did not comprehend the allusion.

"Ah! it was no wonder they looked so queer," exclaimed Elizabeth Bull, "the first time I ever mentioned your name to them. Don't you recollect, Lydia? And they made us describe what sort of a looking person you were, Mary. But when and how did you first know them?"

"And who are they, after all?" inquired Miss Lydia.

"I really must decline saying any more," was my hurried response. "Indeed, I insist upon our entering the house directly."

The Miss Bulls were obliged to submit, and we effected our return into the dwelling without the slightest difficulty as well as without creating any alarm. The Miss Bulls retired to their chamber, a prey to the bitterest feelings of spite, annoyance, and humiliation. As for the housemaid, who had taken up her quarters in the nursery, and who was sitting up reading a romance,—she was amazed at seeing me return, and instantaneously began to overwhelm me with questions. But I positively refused to enter into any details, beyond the one grand fact that the matrimonial project on the part of the two ladies was abandoned. To them did I refer her for any farther explanations; and she withdrew to her own room in high dudgeon at my want of communicativeness.

CHAPTER LXV.

A SINGULAR PROJECT.

The day arriving for me to leave the service of Alderman and Mrs. Bull, I was by no means sorry to bid farewell to the gloomy house and the disagreeable family in Broad Street. I therefore experienced a real pleasure in returning to my old place in the far more cheerful region of Grosvenor Square. Behold me, then, once again installed as under-nurse-maid at Harlesdon House—the companion of the good-tempered Jemima—and restored to the possession of my well-furnished and commodious bed-chamber in the suite of apartments constituting the nursery-floor.

A month now passed without any incident worthy of note: but at the expiration of this period I accidentally became a listener to a conversation which, however trivial in many respects it may appear at first sight, will hereafter be found to have a very intimate connexion with the thread of this narrative. One afternoon I was seated alone with Lady Harlesdon in her private apartment: for I served her as a companion even more than I attended to the duties of the nursery. Her ladyship, who for the last few days had been somewhat pensive and had kept entirely in-doors, was dividing her attention between a new novel and occasional intervals of conversation with me; while I was doing some fine work which I had taught myself and of which I was fond. All of a sudden the door opened; and Lady Davenport with her two daughters entered the room. These ladies have been previously mentioned, the mother as having been once a very handsome woman, but now given to cards and scandal, and likewise to all possible manœuvres to get off her two marriageable daughters. These young ladies I have also alluded to in an earlier chapter as being particularly insipid in looks and "missish" in behaviour. They wore very long ringlets, and had a foolish habit of whispering and giggling with each other, notwithstanding the frowns and pursing-up of the mouth with which their mother was wont to endeavour to check their silliness.

"My dear Lady Harlesdon," said Lady Davenport, taking my noble mistress's hand and shaking it with effusion, "you are doubtless surprised at our bursting in upon you when I know that you are invisible to general visitors; and still more amazed must you be at our penetrating as far as your own private sitting-apartment. But really you must blame Lord Harlesdon for both offences."

"Do sit down, dear Lady Davenport. I am quite delighted to see you!" cried Lady Harlesdon, instantaneously assuming the utmost affability of manner, although I knew full well that in her heart she not only disliked the Davenports, but was the last person in the world to be pleased with such an intrusion after she had sent down positive orders to the hall-porter "that she was not at home"—this being the fashionable falsehood conveying a refusal to see visitors.

"What beautiful thing is that you are working?" demanded Lady Davenport, whose eyes had suddenly lighted upon the work I held in my hand: and she stopped me as, having risen from my seat, I was about leaving the room. "Dear me, how

pretty!" she continued, pretending to look at the work, but all the time examining me from under her eye-lids: then suddenly raising her looks altogether, she said, "Are you that famous Mary Price of whom the world heard so much in respect to the Derby affair? I thought I recollected you. You were at Harlesdon Park when we were staying there last winter: but I did not know you were again in my dear friend Lady Harlesdon's service. You are really a very interesting young person. My dear Lady Harlesdon, I quite envy you the possession of such a treasure as this. She works, too, beautifully! Come, girls, and look at this elegant specimen of what the needle can do."

While Lady Davenport was thus rattling on, I had remained standing in some little degree of confusion: for I felt that those references to "the Derby affair," though most likely made without any aim or purpose, were but too well calculated to excite distressing reminiscences in the mind of my noble mistress. Lady Harlesdon however was enabled to throw that well-bred gloss over her feelings which on most occasions served effectually to veil them; and with a smile, she said, "I am glad your ladyship is pleased with my young friend Mary. I call her a friend, because she really is one; and I am not accustomed to treat her otherwise."

"Oh! any one can see that she is a very superior young person," exclaimed Lady Davenport. "Pray do not let her leave the room for us. On the contrary, I should like the girls to watch her while she goes on with that beautiful work. Nay, Mary," she added, addressing herself to me, "I do insist upon your remaining—or else I myself shall be off at once."

I dare say that Lady Harlesdon would not have been particularly sorry if Lady Davenport had carried this threat into execution: however, for courtesy's sake, she humoured her by observing, "Oh! if you wish Mary to stay, she certainly shall; and I am sure she will have much pleasure in showing your ladyship's daughters how that work is done."

Thus speaking, Lady Harlesdon made a sign for me to sit down again—and I did so. The two Miss Davenports, who had just been whispering and giggling to each other, now approached me—took a chair on each side—and watched me while I resumed my work.

"Now for the explanation which I owe you," cried Lady Davenport. "Just as we stopped at the door in the carriage, Lord Harlesdon dismounted from his horse; and although he confidentially whispered that you, my dear Lady Harlesdon, are not visible to-day to visitors generally, yet he added he was quite sure you would be accessible to us. So in the kindest manner in the world, his lordship escorted us almost up to the very door of this room, and gave us leave and license to enter, telling us that he would shortly appear to receive a scolding from your lips if he had done wrong."

"Oh! I can assure your ladyship that Lord Harlesdon has not done wrong," responded my mistress. "He doubtless thought I might be dull, and considerately afforded me this opportunity of companionship."

"How amiable of his lordship!" said Lady Davenport. "Do you know, my dear Lady Harlesdon, I must congratulate you on possessing a husband who improves as he grows older. I never saw him so affable, so kind, and so good as he has been lately. I can assure you it is quite different with Lord Davenport. He has got the gout now, and is so ill-humoured and irritable that the house will scarcely bear him. I and these dear girls do all we can to soothe and make him comfortable: but he does nothing but grumble and look sour from morning till night. Poor girls!" added Lady Davenport, turning her eyes upon her daughters and sighing profoundly, no doubt in vexation because she had not succeeded in getting either of them off during the last season and began to fear that they would hang heavy on her hands.

At this moment the door opened, and Lord Harlesdon entered.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, in a good-humoured manner, addressing himself to Lady Davenport; "so you have made good your entry into this chamber of solitude?"

"Not altogether of solitude, my lord," rejoined Lady Davenport; "for we found Lady Harlesdon in company with her interesting young companion, who really is so proficient with her needle——There now, she is trying to be off again!"

"Don't go, Mary," said Lord Harlesdon, "since your presence appears to be agreeable to Lady Davenport."

"And she is teaching the girls to work in the same exquisite style," cried the lady thus alluded to.

Lord Harlesdon went and placed himself by his wife's side upon the sofa; and looking at her with an air of mingled kindness and good-humour, he said, "Am I to be scolded for sending these ladies up to you? Really, my dear Clementina, I took pity upon you, though you take none upon yourself; and I thought that a little society would enliven you."

"Then I could not possibly find it in my heart to scold your lordship," replied Lady Harlesdon, laughing. "Besides, you were quite right in surmising that Lady Davenport and the young ladies would be most welcome."

"Of that I felt assured," said his lordship, with a gracious bow to the visitresses. "By the bye, I am truly glad that Lady Davenport has called on this occasion," he continued; "for I have a little idea in my head which I meant to propound to you to-day, my dear Clementina; and I am rejoiced at the opportunity of submitting it to the taste of her ladyship."

"And what is this bright idea?" inquired Lady Davenport, to whom he had just alluded.

"I have been reading in the newspapers," responded Lord Harlesdon, "of the great amusement and diversion afforded by the private theatricals which the Marquis and Marchioness of Clydesdale have had at their beautiful seat in the Highlands. There is a long description of the whole affair in to-day's *Post* and *Herald*——"

"I read it every line," interrupted Lady Davenport, "and was quite charmed."

"Yes—and if mamma had only accepted Lady Clydesdale's invitation," said the elder Miss Davenport, pouting her lips like a spoilt child, "we should have had an opportunity of seeing instead of merely reading those delightful exhibitions."

"Well, my dear, I do regret having declined the invitation," said Lady Davenport: "but a journey

into the Highlands in the middle of winter seemed to me something absolutely horrifying. I should as soon have dreamt of ascending Mount Blanc all by myself. But private theatricals are at this moment the entire rage. Lord and Lady Mordaunt have been having them at their seat in Staffordshire; and even old Lady Bagshot, who called at Davenport House yesterday, told me in confidence that she thought of getting up something of the sort. But about this idea of yours, my lord?"

"My idea appears to have been anticipated by Lady Bagshot," rejoined Lord Harlesdon: "for I thought that if these private theatricals proved so effective and pleasing at a baronial castle in the Highlands, there could be no reason why they should not be got up with greater *eclat* in London."

"And has your lordship really thought seriously of it?" inquired Lady Davenport.

"To be sure! Wherefore not? It would be a change from the usual routine of banquets and balls, soirées and card-parties. But what does my Clementina say?" he inquired, turning to his wife.

"That it will give me the greatest pleasure to assist in anything initiated by you," was Lady Harlesdon's affable and ingenuous response.

"Then it is decided," said his lordship.

"Oh, how rejoiced I am!" exclaimed Lady Davenport, who was as frivolous in most things as ladies of fashion usually are, notwithstanding her cunning and duplicity in manœuvring to catch husbands for her daughters. "Of course Lady Bagshot will abandon the idea when she learns that it has been taken up by Lord and Lady Harlesdon. Besides, how ridiculous on her part to entertain such a thought! She has not a room in her house large enough for the purpose—whereas you have every convenience here. Either the great drawing-room or the banquetting-room would serve admirably. But you must have it fitted up in all respects as well as they did at Clydesdale Castle. The correspondent of the *Post* has given a beautiful description of it."

"Your ladyship may depend," said Lord Harlesdon, "that everything shall be done in the most efficient manner. And now, my dear," he added, turning to his wife, "if you really approve of this idea of mine we will lose no time in carrying it into effect."

"I can only repeat what I have just now said," answered Lady Harlesdon, "that I shall be delighted to assist in getting up the entertainment."

"Oh! but your ladyship must take a part in it," cried Lady Davenport. "I am sure that I will—provided you play something in which there is a character that will suit me. Of course it must be Shakspeare. They had Shakspeare at Clydesdale, and Shakspeare also at the Mordaunts'. Even old Lady Bagshot spoke of Shakspeare: and yet between you and me, I think she knows as much about Shakspeare as of the Chinese language. But the girls," added Lady Davenport, alluding to her daughters, "must take their parts in one of the pieces."

At this announcement the two young ladies gave a look at each other and then burst into a subdued giggle, which lasted for more than a minute, and which not even the frowns of their lady-mother could succeed in repressing. But her ladyship no doubt thought that these private theatricals would be an excellent opportunity for her two daughters to display themselves to an advantage which might produce important results in a matrimonial sense.

"Well then, it is settled," resumed Lord Harlesdon, "that we shall have private theatricals here. I think the banquetting-room will be the best to have fitted up for the occasion: but we shall see. And now we must look around and decide whom we will invite to take part in the representations. We ought to form a kind of little committee to settle the pieces to be performed and the allotment of the characters in a suitable manner. I think we cannot do better than ask Lady Bagshot to become a member of our committee: it will console her for the disappointment in having the idea taken out of her hands. What do you say, Clementina?"

"It would be but courteous," responded Lady Harlesdon.

"Of course your lordship means to perform?" exclaimed Lady Davenport.

"Oh, certainly!" was the answer: and it so much astonished me that I almost dropped my work. The two Miss Davenports exchanged ironical looks, and with difficulty repressed another outburst of giggling. Lady Harlesdon herself experienced some degree of amazement—I could tell by the transient expression of that feeling which flitted over her countenance: but instantaneously recovering herself, she hastened to say something to do away with any unpleasant impression that her husband might have received in case he had noticed that look.

"I am glad to hear," she observed, "that your lordship means to enter heart and soul into a recreation alike so intellectual and amusing."

"But if I take a part in the performances, my dear Clementina," he answered, "it is only on the condition that you do so likewise."

"Under such circumstances, I cannot possibly refuse," rejoined her ladyship.

"We are getting on admirably," cried Lady Davenport; "and I am truly rejoiced that I happened to call here to-day. Come, girls, let us now be off. We have got a round of visits to pay—— By the bye, your lordship of course will give me permission to mention all that has just taken place. The intelligence that London does not mean to be long behind Clydesdale and Staffordshire, should be spread like wild-fire. The whole world of fashion will be in a perfect blaze of excitement. How delightful! how delicious! Besides," she added, in a flattering tone, "when once Lord and Lady Harlesdon have set the example in the metropolis, others will follow it. Girls, I think that we must try and persuade your father to do so. If he were not afflicted with the gout at this moment, I am sure he would."

Having thus rattled away with great volubility, Lady Davenport took her leave, accompanied by her daughters, and attended by Lord Harlesdon, who politely undertook to escort them as far as their carriage. I now remained alone with my mistress; and scarcely had the door closed when she said in a joyous tone, "Is it not truly delightful to see how his lordship has changed? It is like the sternest winter with all its ice thawing and yielding to the advent of the warmest and brightest summer. I do really believe that his lordship has started this idea for the sole purpose of affording recreation and amusement for me. He has seen that for the

last few days I have denied myself to visitors and remained much at home; and he fancies perhaps that I am suffering under lowness of spirits, or require change of scene. He is well aware that if I join in the usual routine of fashionable conventionalisms—or I might rather say frivolities—it is not because I like them; but because, as I have often explained to you, Mary, they form part and parcel of that destiny which belongs to every one moving in the highest sphere: and therefore his lordship may very naturally suppose that there are times when I am wearied of this kind of life. Doubtless, then, it was in the hope of abstracting my mind that he sent up the Davenports to me; and in the same spirit has he now proposed these private theatricals. But he little knows, Mary, the real cause which has led me thus to seclude myself for the last few days and decline either receiving visits or going to entertainments."

"I myself have been fearful that your ladyship had some new cause of sorrow," was the observation that I made when Lady Harlesdon had ceased speaking.

"Not exactly so," she replied. "But I will tell you what it is:"—then after a moment's pause, she added in a lower and more serious tone, "Sir Aubrey Clavering is in London—and you can well understand that I shall not purposely incur the chance of meeting him."

"Has your ladyship seen him?" I asked.

"Yes: the last time I rode out in the carriage—that was five days back. I had occasion to go to Howell and James, to purchase a few trifles; and on coming out, I caught a glimpse of Sir Aubrey Clavering riding on horseback down Regent Street. I affected not to see him, but entered the carriage and drove home."

I said not a word, but was inwardly pleased at the delicate feeling which thus influenced my noble mistress.

"Sir Aubrey Clavering will not of course call at the house until he has met his lordship and myself, or either one of us, and has seen that it is our intention to treat him before the world on the same terms as before. But I need not tell you, Mary," added her ladyship, "that the longer I can postpone such a meeting, the more agreeable is it to me."

Here the conversation ended: for Lord Harlesdon returned to the room, and I went up to the nursery.

On the following day, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, there was a succession of arrivals at the mansion,—Lady Davenport and her daughters coming first, the Dowager-Countess of Bagshot next, and these followed by at least a dozen other visitors male and female. This was the committee, whom, as I subsequently learnt, Lord Harlesdon had invited to meet for the arrangement of the private theatricals. The committee sat about two hours in deliberation; and shortly after it broke up I was summoned to Lady Harlesdon's apartment. I found her alone, looking as cheerful and happy as possible; and I could not help contrasting her present state of mind with what it was a few months back, when in tears and despair she had poured forth her sorrows to me at Canterbury.

"Well, my dear Mary," she said, "I thought you would like to know how the arrangements for the forthcoming entertainment get on. His lordship has displayed the most admirable tact in the selection of his committee,—those odious Davenports and that excruciating old plague Lady Bagshot excepted. But all things considered, I am of opinion that the affair will go off uncommonly well. It is settled for this day month. To-morrow the committee will meet again to decide upon the pieces which are to be performed. It is already understood that one of Shakspeare's dramas is to be the main attraction; and the entertainments will conclude with a *vaudeville*, or farce. We have likewise decided that the banquetting-room is to be fitted up for the occasion: it is the loftiest apartment in the house, and communicating as it does at one extremity with another suite of apartments, it affords facilities for a Green Room, and likewise for dressing-chambers wherein to make such alterations in the toilet as may be necessary between the Acts. His lordship is determined to spare no expense in rendering the whole proceedings as complete as possible. An experienced theatrical manager is to be engaged to superintend all the arrangements; and the banquetting-room will be fitted up in all respects as a theatre. There will be a proper stage, with all the requisite machinery for the drops, shifting the scenes, and so forth. In short, everything is to be on the most accurate as well as the most brilliant scale. We calculate that by forming galleries and laying out the seats in the best manner, at least five or six hundred spectators may be accommodated —and invitations will be issued accordingly."

I listened with attention to all that her ladyship told me: but when she had ceased speaking I made no remark. I do not know how it was, but I did not like the idea of these private theatricals. From the very first moment they were mentioned in my hearing I had felt surprised that a man of Lord Harlesdon's saturnine nature should have so suddenly taken up an idea which though intellectual in one sense, was nevertheless frivolous in another. What I mean is, that although there might be intellectuality enough in the study and contemplation of any one of the masterpieces of Shakspeare, yet that the notion of several lords and ladies—together with other scions, male and female, of the aristocracy—playing at actors appeared to me frivolous to a degree. Therefore when I beheld a man of Lord Harlesdon's age and habitual reserve actually initiating this idea—abandoning himself to it with a sort of schoolboy joyousness—gathering together a committee to sit for hours in deliberation on the scheme—and he himself undertaking to perform a part upon the mimic stage to be erected—I could not help thinking that there was something strange and almost unnatural in such a course. It was evident however that Lady Harlesdon, though eminently intellectual and keen-witted, took not the same view of the matter: she fancied that it was for her sake that his lordship was doing all this—and as she was happy in that belief, it was not for me to disturb it. Besides, after all, this belief of her's might be the true one. Lord Harlesdon in sincere regret for *the past*, might be honestly and frankly exerting himself to the utmost to make *the present* agreeable: and as people of strong passions are most liable to fall into extremes, it was possible that from having been the pitiless avenger he might have become the uxorious husband. In the depths of my heart I fervently prayed that it might really be so!

But Lady Harlesdon perceived that I made no comment upon all she had been saying; and she went on to observe, "Perhaps you think that I am almost as silly as the frivolous Lady Davenport and her two insipid daughters, in thus abandoning myself with a sort of childish delight to the idea of the forthcoming entertainments? But having experienced so long a period of intense and agonizing sufferings, my mind becomes susceptible of amusement even from the veriest trifles so long as they are brilliant and dazzling. Such is human nature, Mary. Besides, I am fully convinced that his lordship is now doing all he can to make me happy; and therefore it is my duty not only to *seem* happy, but to *be* happy! We are all children of a larger growth; and depend upon it that if we can escape from the cares of the world by means of any recreation, however frivolous or light, yet so long as it is innocent, we can rise superior to ridicule. The sagest philosopher may laugh at times, and even chase butterflies if he can induce himself to do so. We must endeavour to make the world as happy an abiding-place as we can."

When I lay down to rest that night I pondered well upon all Lady Harlesdon had said; and though I discovered much truth in her observations, yet I did not find them *all* truth. Some portion of them struck me as being sophistry—and that kind of sophistry too with which people often succeed in blinding their own eyes to the existence of some latent misgiving in the depths of the soul.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE AMATEUR COMMITTEE'S ARRANGEMENTS.

DAY after day did the committee meet; but, as I learnt from Lady Harlesdon, without coming to any

understanding as to which of Shakspeare's plays should be performed. Meanwhile the preparations had commenced in the banquetting-room: all the magnificent furniture had been removed, the mirrors were taken down from the walls, and a host of carpenters had begun to do what in plain terms may be called pulling the place to pieces. The day, as already stated, was fixed for the amateur performance—the cards of invitation were all in readiness to be issued—and it appeared that the whole affair was creating great excitement in the fashionable world.

A week had passed, and yet the Shaksperian drama was not fixed upon. I need not weary the reader with the different objections that were raised to each one that was suggested: suffice it to say that there was a great difficulty in settling the choice, although it was determined that it should be one of the principal and most striking plays of the Bard of Avon. At length the committee assembled one day at an earlier hour than usual with a resolution of not separating until the selection was made. On this occasion the committee sat from noon until past five o'clock; and then it broke up, having come to a decision. When all the carriages had rolled away from the house I was summoned to Lady Harlesdon's apartment: but instead of finding her in the full exhilaration of buoyant spirits as heretofore, I observed that if not exactly pensive, she was at all events struggling against a growing sense of depression.

"I dare say you are anxious to hear what we have done to-day," began her ladyship, endeavouring to look as cheerful as possible: but I saw that it was with the effort of one who puts off a load from the heart. "We have come to a decision—and what piece do you think it is that the committee has settled upon performing?"

Her ladyship paused as if for a reply; but of course I could not even hazard a conjecture on such a point.

"You will never guess, Mary," she continued; and now a more marked expression of uneasiness appeared upon her countenance, which had likewise lost the beautiful sea-shell pink of health and happiness that had for some weeks past shone delicately upon her cheeks.

"Shakspeare has written so many dramas, my lady," I observed, "that of course I cannot fix my surmise upon any one in particular."

"You will perhaps say that it is strange," she resumed; "and yet why should it be so? It is a mere coincidence——scarcely even that——how foolish I am to hesitate thus to tell you what play it is!"

But still she did hesitate; and at length I said, "What is it, my lady?"

"*Othello*," was her answer: and as she gave it, methought it was with a kind of painful effort and likewise with a sort of gasping for breath.

A thrill of terror shot through me. I had read four or five of Shakspeare's plays—the few which, as I had been informed, are alone proper for young females to read: but *Othello* was one of them;—and as her ladyship mentioned the name, the whole of that tremendous drama flamed up as it were in my mind, producing the most painful sensations—nay, even striking me as with a sure presentiment of evil. Lady Harlesdon watched me earnestly as she mentioned that name: she saw that I started, and must have seen likewise that the colour vanished from my cheeks, for I felt that I became pale as death. Her eyes instantaneously fell; but her lips trembled as if something wavered upon them,—something that she wished to say, but had not the courage! There was more than a minute's profound silence: and a very painful silence it was—at least for me. I am certain that it was equally painful, even if not more so, for Lady Harlesdon.

"It is useless to disguise it," she suddenly exclaimed, as if feeling the necessity of touching on the disagreeable topic, yet doing so in a paroxysm of desperation: "it is useless to disguise it—but the coincidence *is* strange!"

"It is, my lady," I answered.

"There is something ominous in your tone, Mary," she observed anxiously.

"Heaven forbid that you should think so!" I exclaimed. "But how came it, dear lady, that this particular drama was chosen?"

"The committee, on meeting to-day," replied Lady Harlesdon, "first decided that the choice should be made from *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello*. Upon those four the discussion then took place. In due course *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* were rejected. The choice then lay between *Macbeth* and *Othello*. For a considerable time I thought—and hoped," continued Lady Harlesdon hesitatingly, "that *Macbeth* would prove the favourite: but suddenly Lady Davenport suggested that it would be impossible to find three old ladies to take the part of the Witches—and so *Othello* was carried by a very large majority. The committee then broke up; and it meets again to-morrow to distribute the parts to those who are to have a share in the representation."

I said nothing, for I experienced a heavy weight upon my soul—a weight which I vainly endeavoured to shake off. Indeed, I was dull—depressed—dispirited—almost miserable.

"I see what is passing in your mind," said Lady Harlesdon, again breaking a silence which had endured for several minutes. "You consider the selection of *Othello* to be unfortunate. But recollect that whatever little scandalous whisperings there may have been in a certain respect, they are no longer believed. The evident happiness in which his lordship and I now live together, has completely refuted them; and therefore it is impossible that the members of the committee could have had a sinister motive in the choice which they have made relative to this particular drama of Shakspeare."

At this moment one of the lady's-maids entered the apartment with some letters, and I took the opportunity to withdraw: for it pained me to continue discoursing upon a topic which involved an incident that had struck me as most serious. When I went to bed at night it was long ere sleep visited my eyes; and even after slumber had wrapped me in its embrace, I was haunted by dreams in which I beheld vividly depicted all the details of Shakspeare's wondrous drama, together with its terrible catastrophe.

When the committee met on the following day I experienced an uneasiness which continued growing painfully upon me the longer the members of that committee sat in deliberation. It appeared as if they were actually a jury met to decide upon the fate of an accused person, though this accused was

herself one of that jury. It was a strange confusion of ideas that I had; and though, during the three or four hours that thus elapsed, I frequently blamed myself for giving way to vague presentiments and shadowy forebodings, yet I could not escape from their influence. I felt as if a storm were gathering over the house, and that some dread catastrophe would ensue. At last I knew by the departure of the carriages that the committee had broken up; and I now anxiously expected to be summoned as usual to my mistress. But no—in this I was disappointed; and my suspense became absolute torture. Even Jemima, who was not particularly far-seeing in such matters, inquired if anything ailed me; for she assured me that I looked unhappy and careworn. I endeavoured to bustle about to convince her that nothing was the matter; but I could not shake off the disagreeable sensations that were upon me.

An hour and a half had elapsed since the departure of the last carriage, when one of the lady's-maids came up to inform me that I was wanted by her ladyship. I hurried down stairs: and the moment I entered the apartment where my noble mistress was seated alone, I saw by her countenance that (as on the preceding day) she was troubled with an agitation against which she vainly battled, and which with equal fruitlessness did she endeavour to conceal.

"You can guess why I have sent for you, Mary," she began: "knowing how interested you are in all the preliminary arrangements which are making for these amateur theatricals, I thought you would like to hear the result of to-day's proceedings on the part of the committee. There are more strange coincidences, if in such a light we ought to regard them:"—and she endeavoured to smile, but it was a sickly and even a ghastly attempt.

"The committee has settled the characters, then, my dear lady?" I said, sitting down as she beckoned me to do.

"Yes:"—and Lady Harlesdon affected to laugh, but the endeavour was as sad and mournful as the previous attempt to smile. "What would you think, Mary, if I were to tell you that I am to perform the part of Desdemona?"

"And Lord Harlesdon?" I instantaneously said, with a cold shudder.

"Oh! the great majority of the committee insisted upon his lordship taking the principal male character:"—and I saw that Lady Harlesdon could not bring herself to mention the name.

"Ah!" I cried. "Now I understand the cause of my uneasiness while the committee was sitting to-day. It was a presentiment—and it has been fulfilled."

"A presentiment of what?" demanded Lady Harlesdon quickly.

"A presentiment that the two principal characters would be thus assigned:"—and I suddenly burst into tears.

"Good heavens, Mary!" exclaimed her ladyship: "what is the meaning of this emotion?"—but there was a wildness in her eyes as she spoke and an expression of anguished uneasiness upon her countenance.

"Dear lady," I said, in a broken voice and with tearful eyes, "I conjure you to have nothing to do with these theatricals! From the very first I have not liked the idea: and now I am positively frightened at it. There is something ominous in every step that is taken——"

"Hush, Mary—we might be overheard!" said Lady Harlesdon, glancing uneasily towards the door. "I admit that I myself should be better pleased if things had not gone so far: but I cannot possibly retreat without covering myself with ridicule."

"And yet, dear lady, you yourself have your misgivings!" I exclaimed, earnestly and with vehemence. "I know you have! I saw them expressed in your looks yesterday! I have observed them again to-day!"

"It is true, Mary, that I have been made somewhat nervous and uneasy by the coincidences which have led to the choice of *Othello* and the assignment of the principal characters to myself and Lord Harlesdon. But after all, it is weak and foolish to give way to such misgivings."

"How does your ladyship know that they are coincidences?" I asked: "how can you be assured that they are the result of accident? For my part, I tremble lest there should be some secret and underhand influence which has deliberately led to these arrangements, and has cunningly invested them with the air of chance, accident, or coincidence, whichever you may term it."

"Listen, Mary," said Lady Harlesdon, now speaking in a more collected manner than at first. "Neither yesterday nor to-day was there anything in the deliberations of the committee to justify the belief that there could have been secret or undue influence exercised. Every one gave his or her opinion freely and without constraint. When the committee broke up just now, the reason I did not immediately send for you was because his lordship followed me hither to my apartment, so soon as the carriages had rolled away; and we had a long conversation together. He began by saying that he was glad this particular drama of Shakspeare had been chosen—glad also that the two leading characters had been assigned to himself and me—because, as he observed, the adoption of such a play with such an apportionment of the two principal parts would tend more than anything else to brand as false and calumniatory any little whisperings which scandal may have circulated concerning me. I told his lordship that I could scarcely view the matter in the same light. Then he sat down, and began to reason with me so kindly, so patiently, and at the same time so earnestly, that I was compelled to yield to his arguments and admit that perhaps after all the arrangements were for the best. He remained with me for more than an hour—and when he retired, I sent up for you."

"But if your ladyship were so thoroughly convinced by everything Lord Harlesdon said," I observed, "wherefore did I find you troubled and agitated when I entered the room?"

"Because I was very silly, weak-minded, and foolish," returned her ladyship, now endeavouring to laugh off her previous depression and uneasiness. "After all, my dear Mary, you must admit that it is ridiculous to conjure up evils where none exist, and invest a perfectly ordinary proceeding with an ominous aspect. You still look grave, and even gloomy. Come, my dear girl, tell me candidly what your thoughts are?"

"Your ladyship desires me to speak with complete frankness?" I said.

"To be sure," she answered, "Tell me your reflections with as little reserve or constraint as if you were my sister."

"Then, my lady," I rejoined, "I am fearful that beneath all this apparent kindness and good-humour, and even joviality, his lordship is nursing some treacherous intent. Now I have spoken candidly, even at the risk of offending you."

"No—you cannot offend me, Mary," said her ladyship; "because I am well aware you entertain a sincere affection for me. But, granting for a moment that your surmise is correct, what treachery could his lordship possibly have in contemplation? You do not imagine," she added, again laughing, "that he will avail himself of the circumstances of the drama in order to put me to death?"

"No, my lady—such an idea has never entered my head: but I do fear that his lordship will avail himself of the power which his part will give him to lacerate your heart with real taunts and upbraidings, and that he will mercilessly drag you through a terrible ordeal in the presence of the entire audience. I fear that he will throw so much reality into his performance, and identify himself so completely as it were with the terrible hero of the piece, that you, forgetting you are Desdemona, will have the feelings of Lady Harlesdon. And then exposure may ensue——in short, I have a presentiment, dear lady, of some catastrophe of this kind; and I beseech you to retreat from having anything to do with these theatricals, ere it be too late."

Lady Harlesdon's countenance had gradually grown grave and even sombre as I thus addressed her with excitement and vehemence; and when I had left off speaking, she gave me no immediate reply, but sat pensive and mournful.

"I must candidly confess, Mary," she at length said, slowly raising her looks, "that I myself have been tortured with precisely the same presentiment to which you have given form and substance. But, after all, even supposing that my husband could be guilty of such a vile and despicable act of treachery,—even granting that his reconciliation is only assumed in order to be made the means of leading me on into a position which shall give him the opportunity of accomplishing a crowning vengeance,—may I not baffle him by means of my own fortitude? If through the character of Othello he speaks direct at me, have I not a part to perform which will inspire me with the courage requisite to pass through the ordeal? For remember that Desdemona is innocent. Ah! I understand that sudden expression which has appeared upon your countenance, Mary: for the thought struck you that though Desdemona is innocent, Lady Harlesdon is not!"

I could not deny that such a reflection had at the moment flashed to my mind: but perceiving that her ladyship was pained by the circumstance, I took her hand, pressed it to my lips, and exclaimed, with the tears once more trickling down my cheeks, "Whatever fears I entertain, dear lady, are because I love you—because you have ever been so good and kind to me—and because it would almost break my heart to see you doomed to suffer any more at the hands of his lordship!"

"You are a good girl," she said, kissing me affectionately: "but the longer I reflect upon all these things, the more I am inclined to believe that there is nothing to apprehend, and that Lord Harlesdon is completely honest and sincere in his reconciliation with me. But remember, Mary," continued her ladyship in a lower and graver tone, "that my husband is keenly sensitive on the point of his honour; and he will do everything he can to make the world believe that the whisperings of scandal relative to myself and Sir Aubrey Clavering were a foul calumny. Is it not therefore intelligible enough that he should be rejoiced at the selection of this drama and at the assignment of the two leading characters to himself and me, because the world will naturally argue that we should never dare appear even before our friends to play such parts, unless I were conscious of my innocence and he were equally convinced that his honour had never been tarnished? Yes," exclaimed Lady Harlesdon, with the joy of one who is enabled by strong argument to crush all disagreeable misgivings: "that is the key to his lordship's sentiments upon the subject! And therefore, even if he has privately used his influence with some of the members of the committee to produce the results which have so much frightened you, Mary, his motive in so doing is apparent enough. Now I have made up my mind to yield to these silly fears no more, but to fling myself heart and soul into the excitement of the preparations for the forthcoming entertainments."

I saw that Lady Harlesdon did not wish to debate upon the subject any longer, and that even if she were not altogether satisfied in the conclusions to which she had come, she nevertheless chose to appear so, and also studied to persuade herself into the belief that she was thus satisfied. I accordingly said no more, but hastened up to the nursery, leaving my mistress to dress for dinner.

When night came, and Jemima and the children were asleep, I sat down at the table in my own chamber to look over Shakspeare's terribly sublime tragedy of *Othello*. I had procured the volume from the library in the course of the evening: for I had free permission from Lady Harlesdon to have access to the well-stored book-shelves in that library whenever I chose. Although nearly every one who can read has read *Othello*, and if not read it has seen it performed upon the stage, yet as there must be some who are unacquainted with it altogether, it will be useful for the purposes of my narrative to give a short sketch of the incidents of that drama. This, then, is the outline of Shakspeare's greatest tragedy:—

Othello was a Moor, well stricken in years, and by no means of prepossessing appearance, but having the black skin and the thick lips of the aboriginal African race. His life had been principally devoted to military service; and after having passed through an infinite variety of adventures and perils of the most thrilling character, both by land and by sea, he placed his sword at the disposal of the Venetian Republic. Venice was at the time engaged in warfare against the Turks: but Othello vanquished the enemy and added fresh glory to the annals of Venetian history. Believing the war to be ended, he returned to Venice, where he was received with all the honours due to his signal services. Amongst the

officers attached to his staff, was one named Iago, who served as his standard-bearer, or ancient. The post of lieutenant (or principal officer next in rank to Othello) becoming vacant, Iago aspired to it: but to his mortification, he found an inexperienced young man, named Cassio, preferred to him. Cassio was more remarkable for his personal beauty and his intellectual acquirements than for his military proficiency: and therefore Iago, who had fought boldly in the recent wars against the Turks, was not without just grounds for being offended at the preference. While smarting with the sense of wrong and longing for revenge, he discovered that Othello had carried off and privately married the Lady Desdemona, daughter of a Venetian senator: and at the same time Iago encountered a young Venetian gentleman, named Roderigo, who was deeply enamoured of Desdemona, but had been rejected by her. Iago and Roderigo, reciting their wrongs to each other, determined upon revenge; and their first step was immediately to raise a disturbance at the senator's house and warn him that his daughter had been carried off. The senator vowed to punish Othello, and at once had the matter brought before the Duke of Venice. At the same moment, however, intelligence arrived that the Turks had renewed hostilities, and that their fleets were threatening the islands of Rhodes and Cyprus, then in the possession of Venice. The Duke had already determined that Othello should command the Venetian forces, when the charge relative to the carrying off of Desdemona was made. The senator accused Othello of having practised magic arts and sorceries in order to captivate Desdemona's heart; but Othello, in a speech of powerful eloquence, showed that the only arts he had practised consisted in having told the tale of his exploits, his adventures, and his travels in the presence of Desdemona, who was thereby led to love him as a hero. The lady herself appeared before the Duke to corroborate this defence; and the senator was compelled to be satisfied.

Othello was now at once appointed to the government of the Isle of Cyprus; and thither did he proceed without delay, followed shortly after by Desdemona, whom he had left to the charge of Cassio, Iago, and Emilia (Iago's wife). Roderigo, at the instance of Iago, likewise quitted Venice and repaired to Cyprus. On arriving in the island, Iago pursued his vindictive aims, to which he was incited not only by mortification at having Cassio put over his head, but also because he fancied that Othello had intrigued with his wife Emilia. Making Roderigo his tool, he fomented a quarrel between him and Cassio. In this dispute a person of high rank not only became involved, but was wounded by Cassio. Othello, compelled to visit this offence heavily upon Cassio, discharged him from his office of lieutenant. This was precisely the circumstance that Iago had laboured to bring about, so that with a fiendish ingenuity he might prompt Cassio to appeal to Desdemona to interest herself with Othello in his behalf. Cassio readily adopted the advice of his supposed friend and obtained an interview with Desdemona, who in the generosity of her heart warmly espoused his cause. Iago took good care that Othello should observe the meeting from a distance; and to the natural circumstances thereof, he, with a satanic artifice, managed to give such a colouring as to excite the Moor's jealousy. This feeling, once aroused, was kept vividly alive by the treacherous Iago. He contrived to obtain possession of a handkerchief of a very curious embroidery, which Othello had presented to Desdemona; and this handkerchief Iago got placed under Cassio's pillow in his sleeping apartment. In a subsequent conversation with the Moor, Iago mentioned that he had seen Cassio in possession of the handkerchief. Othello, blinded as well as goaded by his maddening jealousy, at once jumped to the conclusion that Desdemona had given Cassio the handkerchief. He sought an opportunity of demanding her to produce it, which she was of course unable to do: but at the same time, little suspecting how every word she uttered was like pouring oil upon fire, she earnestly interceded for the restoration of Cassio to his office. Everything therefore appeared to confirm Othello's suspicions; and on a subsequent occasion he openly charged her with infidelity, yet mentioned not the name of her supposed lover.

Things had now been brought to a pass which rendered it necessary for Iago to get rid either of his instrument Roderigo or else of Cassio; and he accordingly persuaded the former to assassinate the latter. Roderigo was however wounded in the attempt; but Iago treacherously assailed Cassio with his sword, the darkness of the night favouring the assault. As Roderigo was not slain, and was likely to reveal all he knew, Iago made an end of him. But in the mean time a terrible tragedy was taking place in the Moor's chamber: for there, after accusing Desdemona of her fancied infidelities, and having bade her make her peace with heaven, Othello smothered her in her bed. A complete exposure of all Iago's villany immediately afterwards took place, chiefly brought about by Emilia proclaiming that she herself had surreptitiously taken the handkerchief and given it to her husband. Several letters, found about the person of the murdered Roderigo, threw farther light upon Iago's treacheries; and the unhappy Moor, when too late discovering that his wife was innocent, stabbed himself with his sword and fell upon the corpse of the murdered Desdemona.

Such is the outline of that drama in which Lord and Lady Harlesdon were to play the principal parts. I sat up for more than two hours, on the night to which I am alluding, painfully absorbed in the perusal of this terrific tragedy; and the longer I dwelt upon those scenes in which Othello and Desdemona figure, the more was I appalled at the tremendous scope that would be afforded for his lordship to overwhelm my poor mistress with the bitterest taunts and upbraidings, to which if he chose he might give so natural and life-like an effect! When I retired to rest and sleep visited my eyes, my dreams were filled with images of terror; so that I awoke in the morning unrefreshed, and very far from being relieved of the sinister presentiments and gloomy forebodings which had haunted my mind ere I sought my couch.

For the next week I saw very little of Lady Harlesdon, and seldom was alone with her. Not that she kept me at a distance, or was less kind towards me than heretofore; but because she was now so thoroughly engaged in learning her part, rehearsing it, and assisting her husband to superin-

tend the managements and decorations of the banquetting-room. At the expiration of that week however—it being on a Sunday afternoon—her ladyship sent for me to her own apartment; when she told me that his lordship had met Sir Aubrey Clavering in the morning, and that as the baronet had been courteously addressed, he might be expected to call at the house. Lady Harlesdon then proceeded to say, "I must tell you candidly, my dear Mary, that I shall not be over well pleased if Sir Aubrey is invited as a guest on the evening of the dramatic performances: and yet I do not very well see how it is possible to avoid it, considering how intimate he has always been at the house, and how strange it will therefore appear to exclude him on such an occasion."

A few days afterwards, when I again had an opportunity of speaking to Lady Harlesdon, she told me that Sir Aubrey Clavering was invited to the amateur representations, Lord Harlesdon having observed that it would seem singular indeed if he were excluded on the very evening when the most signal refutation was to be given to the whisperings of scandal. Besides, it appeared that Lady Davenport and several other members of the committee had suggested that Sir Aubrey's name should be added to the list of invitations, not merely because he was one of the leading young men of fashion, but also because he was known to be an enthusiastic admirer of Shakspeare, and it was desirable to include amongst the audience all those ladies and gentlemen whose reputation for refined taste would give an additional *eclat* to the whole proceeding.

A few more days passed, and the banquetting-room was finished. It certainly was fitted up in the most elegant and convenient manner possible. Its great height afforded ample space for the erection of a gallery—or rather a tier of boxes—round three sides, the fourth being occupied with the stage and its appurtenances. One portion of the gallery, as I had better call it, was screened off from the rest, and intended for the numerous persons forming Lord and Lady Harlesdon's household,—it being arranged that all the domestics should be favoured with a view of the performances.

Lady Harlesdon continued in excellent spirits, and seemed entirely to have got rid of the misgivings which had at first troubled her. The frequent rehearsals had familiarized her with the part she had to play, and had afforded her, as she believed, a perfect insight into the style which her husband intended to adopt in the development of the leading character of the piece. She had seen nothing in his look, his manner, or his delivery, to encourage the slightest apprehension in her mind, or to make her dread that he would wield with a treacherous effect any of those terrible weapons of language with which the enactment of the jealous Moor would furnish him.

Moreover, when they were alone together, Lord Harlesdon continued so kind, and even so affectionate, that it was no longer possible for her to doubt his sincerity, or in any way to mistrust him. Indeed, such was her confidence that I myself became reassured; so that as the day approached, and I beheld her in the best of spirits, and radiant in health and beauty, I could not help smiling at the ominous presentiments which I had entertained and which appeared to have been so groundless.

CHAPTER LXVII.

OTHELLO.

THE all-important evening came. The members of the committee, as well as those who were to take part in the performances, together with a few select friends, were invited to an early dinner: that is to say, early for Harlesdon House—the hour being five o'clock. The gentlemen did not linger over their wine; but at half-past six all those who were to appear upon the stage that evening quitted the table and repaired to the several dressing-rooms provided for them. At seven o'clock the numerously invited company began to arrive; and in half-an-hour the banquetting-room—or the theatre as I might now call it—was thronged with all the *elite* of rank and fashion.

Together with the other members of the household, I took my seat in the department screened off for our accommodation; and I was fortunate in obtaining the very best seat—namely, that at the extremity of the gallery overlooking the stage. Jemima sat next to me; and we had with us the two boys, Miss Isabella Clementina being asleep in the nursery and in the care of one of the housemaids, who being indifferent relative to the dramatic exhibition, had volunteered to take charge of the nursery.

I have already stated that the little theatre was fitted up in the most tasteful and elegant manner. The seats were all covered with crimson velvet, and on the floor they had been so arranged as to rise with a gentle ascent, so as to present an amphitheatrical effect. There was the place for the orchestra, which consisted of a splendid band: a magnificent lustre, suspended to the ceiling, threw a blaze of light upon the scene, the splendour and brilliancy of which were enhanced by the ostrich plumes waving gracefully above the heads of titled dames and the diamonds that glistened in the hair of their beauteous daughters. Upwards of six hundred fashionably dressed gentlemen and elegantly apparelled ladies were congregated in the amphitheatre and in all that part of the gallery which was independent of the portion allotted for the use of the domestics. Amongst them I recognised many faces well known at Harlesdon House; and in the amphitheatre, on the very foremost row of seats nearest to the orchestra, Sir Aubrey Clavering was placed. Once, ere the curtain rose, he looked up at me: but I appeared not to notice him, although at the first glance I perceived that he was astonished to observe me there—evidently not knowing that I had returned into her ladyship's service.

The exhilarating music swelled through the theatre; and every eye appeared to brighten at the inspiring sounds. Then, at the expiration of the symphony, the curtain rose upon the first scene of Shakspeare's tragedy of *Othello*. In that scene a street of Venice is represented: and the scenery itself, although the footlights were lowered to represent night, produced the finest effect. Giving promise of what the future scenery would be, it showed that in no single detail had expense been spared so as to get up the representation in as perfect a manner as possible. The part of Iago, who appears with Roderigo in the first scene, was performed by a gentleman who en-

tered fully into the spirit of Shakspeare's creation,—displaying all the qualities of the mortified, vindictive, unprincipled schemer whose villany constitutes the pivot whereon turns the whole action of the tragedy. The part of Cassio in the second scene was played by a young nobleman of very handsome person, and who likewise understood the character he was required to adopt. The reader already knows that Lord Harlesdon was Othello; and it was quite evident from the very first moment when his lordship made his appearance that he comprehended with the nicest and keenest appreciation every trait in the character of the Moor. Indeed, with a powerful effect did he deliver in the third scene that well-known speech commencing with the lines—

Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
My very noble and approved good masters,—
That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
It is most true; true, I have married her;
The very head and front of my offending
Hath this extent, no more.

But even with still greater effect did Lord Harlesdon deliver that speech wherein Othello describes how he won Desdemona's love, concluding with the lines—

My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
She swore,—In faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:
She wished she had not heard it; yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man: she thanked me;
And bade me if I had a friend that lov'd her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint, I spake;
She lov'd me for the dangers I had passed;
And I loved her, that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have us'd;
Here comes the lady, let her witness it.

The entrance of Lady Harlesdon as Desdemona was greeted with much louder and more enthusiastic applause than might have been expected on the part of so aristocratic an audience: but the spirit with which Lord Harlesdon had delivered the two fine speeches above specified, had infused a thrilling fervour amongst the listeners—and they were all now prepared to enter heart and soul into the enjoyment of the intellectual treat thus offered to them. With exquisite sweetness did Lady Harlesdon deliver that address to her father in which she says that between him and her husband she perceives a divided duty, but that a full sense of the duty which a wife owes to her husband makes her cling to the Moor. But infinitely finer was she a few minutes afterwards, when in reply to a question put by the Duke of Venice, she says—

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world; my heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord:
I saw Othello's visage in his mind;
And to his honours, and his valiant parts,
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rights for which I love him, are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence:—Let me go with him.

The first act concluded to the infinite satisfaction of all present; and the moment the curtain dropped there was a perfect storm of applause from every part of the theatre.

"Who would have thought," whispered Jemima to me, "that his lordship could have played his part so well? I really did not think he had spirit enough to do so: I fancied him too cold—too stern—too severe. And for a man of his age, too, how well he made his voice heard! But her ladyship—was not she beautiful as Desdemona? I really thought I should cry when she pleaded so hard to accompany her husband. But where is Othello going? I could not exactly catch that."

"To Cyprus," I answered.

Jemima went on chattering, but in a low whisper, till the curtain drew up again: and now commenced the second act, which is somewhat dry at the opening, but becomes very exciting in that scene where Roderigo and Cassio quarrel. Montano, the former governor is wounded; and Othello with his attendants, all roused from their beds, make their appearance to ascertain the cause of the disturbance. There is one fine point which Othello has to make in this scene: it is where he dismisses Cassio; and this was accomplished by Lord Harlesdon with masterly effect:—

I know, Iago,
Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,
Making it light to Cassio:——Cassio, I love thee;
But never more be officer of mine.

The second act terminated amidst renewed applause; and during the interval, ere the curtain rose again, the theatre was filled with the buzzing sounds of voices as the audience passed their opinions with each other upon the progress of the drama. Jemima gave me her sentiments upon the subject, which were to the effect that she was quite surprised how a number of lords, gentlemen, and ladies could have managed to learn their parts so admirably and represent the characters of the play so successfully.

The third act now began; and in the third scene all the merits of Othello's and Iago's performance were most effectively exhibited. It is in this scene that Iago begins to instil the poison of jealousy into Othello's ear; and while with seeming frankness warning his master against the green-eyed monster, he insidiously and artfully throws out a thousand little hints and inuendos which though apparently such trifling sparks in themselves, soon set the combustible materials of Othello's nature in a blaze. Lord Harlesdon, as Othello, now appeared to be inimitable: he seemed to identify himself altogether with the character he was personating,—as if the scene itself were the expression of his own thoughts,—as if it were not a part that he was playing, but a reality he was experiencing,—as if it were not an English peer treading those boards, with blackened face and in stage garments, but the Moor of Venice himself, with his acerbated feelings, his fierce looks, and his impassioned gestures. Indeed I shuddered—I felt cold all over—I experienced a faintness at the heart, as he delivered that soliloquy, when Iago has left him, which concludes thus:—

Or, for I am declin'd
Into the vale of years;—yet that's not much;—
She's gone; I am abused; and my relief
Must be—to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures our's,
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,

Than keep a corner in the thing I love,
For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of great ones;
Prerogativ'd are they less than the base;
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death;
Even then this forked plague is fated to us,
When we do quicken.

These words were delivered with a power and an effect that first galvanised, then petrified the entire audience; and there was in my heart the strongest certainty that Lord Harlesdon felt at the time the force—yes, and the meaning too, of all he uttered. It was with withering accents, accompanied by an ineffable bitterness of look, that he had invoked that malediction upon *marriage;* and also when he declared that he would rather be a toad, &c. Immediately after the delivery of that speech, Lady Harlesdon as Desdemona had to appear upon the stage. I could not help watching her narrowly—eagerly—yes, with the intensest scrutiny; and I could see that she was somewhat agitated, as if when behind the scenes *she* too had felt the power and the terrible sincerity with which her husband had delivered that speech every line of which—aye, every word, applied so entirely to *him* and to *her!* Even when she spoke I could discern a slight tremulousness in her accents, although such ought not to have been according to the words she had to speak at that stage of the performance. She however had to remain but a few minutes on this occasion; and very shortly afterwards came that magnificent scene between Othello and Iago where the latter excites still more than he had hitherto done the jealousy of the Moor. Now, as Lord Harlesdon, still more and more if possible identifying himself with the character of Othello, listened to Iago's speeches, and from time to time gave vent to his own passionate outbursts of fearful menace and vehement exclamation, there was so powerful an expression of *the reality* upon his countenance as even to inspire terror. That old nobleman was indeed sublime in

his personification of the character: but it was an appalling sublimity, even to those who knew not so much as I did!

"Is he in earnest? or is he really only playing?" asked Jemima of me, in a low half-hushed whisper; and as I turned to answer her, I saw that the poor young woman was trembling all over and pale as death, so that the two little boys who looked up in her countenance at the same time, were both actually frightened.

"Hush!" I said, shivering all over with a cold tremor; and then to the little children I whispered some kind and reassuring words. But I suddenly stopped short; for all my attention was absorbed in the frightful energy with which Lord Harlesdon was thundering forth those awful lines—

> Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!
> Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
> To tyrannous hate! swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
> For 'tis of aspicks' tongues!

Soon afterwards came the scene where Othello demands of Desdemona the handkerchief; and while I still felt that there was something awfully real in Lord Harlesdon's performance, I was still equally convinced that her ladyship felt frightened, although she did her best to play this portion of the scene with the unsuspecting gentleness properly characteristic of Desdemona at that stage of the proceedings. The third act concluded amidst reiterated applause; and then began the buzz of voices again amongst the spectators, as they interchanged their comments.

In the fourth act Lord Harlesdon continued to do a terrific justice to the character which he was enacting,—no, not enacting—with which he was indentifying himself! In that fearful scene where Othello accuses Desdemona of infidelity, I could observe the tremendous workings of Lord Harlesdon's countenance, notwithstanding the black dye with which it was stained: I could mark the fierce contracting of the brows, the forcible compression of the lips, the play of rage and immitigable hate upon every feature: I could see his eyes flashing fire and his looks striking sharp daggers down into the very heart of my poor mistress: I could see also that she herself felt there was a terrible reality in her husband's performance, and that every word he uttered was not in mere pursuance of his part, but a veritable taunt and a branding accusation addressed to herself—so that in her terror and under the lacerations which she was so cruelly enduring, her own acting became vividly life-like and strikingly real. The audience listened with suspended breath, and gazed with fixed looks, as if forgetting that it was a mere performance on a stage,—forgetting that it was the conception of a poet which was being carried out,—but with a kind of concentrated terror, believing that man to be a real Othello and that woman to be a real Desdemona! Up to the end of the fourth act was this state of feeling sustained; and then, as the curtain fell again, there was an indescribable sensation of relief experienced by the whole audience. I could see that such was the case—I knew it—I shared the same sensation: it was as if a terrific spell had been lifted from every mind—as if the power of an unnatural fascination had been suddenly removed!

"Good heavens," whispered Jemima, now appearing to breathe freely again; "how I have been terrified! I quite forgot that Othello was Lord Harlesdon, and Desdemona her ladyship. During all the last part of this scene I felt as if everything passing before me was quite real and horribly natural. But how pale you look, Mary! You have been frightened also?"

I was about to answer, but at that moment my eyes unwittingly fell upon Sir Aubrey Clavering, who was seated on the front bench below and in such a situation that from my place I could look down upon him. I saw that he was pale and evidently agitated. He played with his moustache—he twirled his glove round and round—he stood up—he sat down again—and his eyes wandered about with a restless uneasiness. I, who was feeling so keenly myself, could full well understand and appreciate the same keenness of feeling in others. Beyond all doubt, Sir Aubrey Clavering had been profoundly moved by Lord Harlesdon's personification of the terrible Moor.

The curtain rose upon the fifth act, and a solemn silence suddenly fell upon the audience,—a silence which, succeeding so abruptly to the hum of hundreds of voices, struck with the chill of an omen upon my heart. The first scene, in which Roderigo is slain and Cassio wounded, was witnessed with that emotionless sort of attention which was saving all its concentrated interest for the one that was to follow. And that one was the bed-chamber scene, where Desdemona is discovered lying upon a couch asleep, a light burning in the room, and Othello preparing to execute his vengeance. Upon the countenance of Lord Harlesdon methought I read the sternness of a terrible purpose. An oppressive uneasiness fell upon me, heavy as lead, yet excruciating as if my brain were on fire and my heart were being torn by scorpions. For a moment I felt as if I must cry out; and I only checked the scream of terror at the very instant it was about to find vent from my lips. Then Lord Harlesdon commenced the opening speech of the scene; and my attention was rivetted with a fearful interest upon him:—

> It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul—
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—
> It is the cause.—Yet I'll not shed her blood;
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
> And smooth as monumental alabaster.—
> [*Takes off his sword.*
> Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
> Put out the light, and then put out the light:
> If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
> I can again thy former light restore,
> Should I repent me:—but once put out thine,
> Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
> I know not where is that Promethean heat,
> That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd thy rose,
> I cannot give it vital growth again,
> It needs must wither:—I'll smell it on the tree.—
> [*Kissing her.*
> O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
> Justice to break her sword!—One more, one more.—
> Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
> And love thee after:—One more, and this the last:
> So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
> But they are cruel tears: This sorrow's heavenly;
> It strikes, where it doth love.—She wakes——
> *Des.* Who's there? Othello?
> *Oth.* Ay, Desdemona.
> *Des.* Will you come to bed, my lord?

Oth. Have you pray'd to-night, Desdemona?
Des. Ay, my lord.
Oth. If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.
Des. Alas, my lord, what may you mean by that?
Oth. Well, do it, and be brief: I will walk by:
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit:
No,—Heaven forfend,—I would not kill thy soul.
Des. Talk you of killing?
Oth. Ay, I do.
Des. Then, heaven
Have mercy on me!
Oth. Amen, with all my heart!
Des. If you say so, I hope you will not kill me.
Oth. Humph!
Des. And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then,
When your eyes roll so: Why I should fear, I know not,
Since guiltiness I know not; but yet, I feel, I fear.

It was in a piercing, rending voice that Lady Harlesdon, as Desdemona, had given vent to these last words,—words which thrilled forth with a wild cry as if coming in all the intenseness of a real terror from the bottom of her heart. For the looks of her husband, as Othello, were indeed terrible—and his eyes were in truth rolling with a savage ferocity. The entire audience seemed to share Lady Harlesdon's fright; and by an instinctive movement several persons half rose from their seats, as if ready to precipitate themselves towards the stage and prevent a catastrophe; but then they sat down again, no doubt recalled by a second thought to the conviction that it was a mere play after all. Oh! I could understand the feeling that was at the bottom of every heart,—a feeling that it was not Othello and Desdemona, but Lord Harlesdon and his wife—and that in the mind of the former there was a real sentiment of implacable vengeance, and in that of the latter, a horrible alarm! Every one sat with suspended breath, lips apart, head inclined forward, and looks rivetted upon the scene,—evidently attributing to admiration the undefinable sensations that thus kept them spell-bound.

"I am terribly frightened, Mary," whispered Jemima to me.

"And I also," was my involuntary answer. "Would to heaven it were over!"

At that moment I suddenly observed Sir Aubrey Clavering rise from his seat and abruptly quit the theatre by a side-door. What could this mean? what was he about to do? Had he from the place where he had been sitting, a better opportunity of observing the looks of Lord Harlesdon than I had up in the gallery? and did he apprehend anything serious? I knew not—and yet this little incident suddenly enhanced my alarms to an intolerable degree of poignancy. In less than a minute the door which led into that compartment of the gallery allotted to the servants, opened abruptly—and instinctively looking round, I beheld Sir Aubrey Clavering beckoning me with passionate vehemence. None of the other servants noticed that he was there; nor had they even observed that the door itself had opened, so intent were they upon watching the progress of the scene.

A horrible idea struck me: or rather, all my former presentiments and misgivings were suddenly concentrated into this one horrible idea. The scene passing upon the stage was a reality—and Clavering knew it to be such! This was the hideous thought that thus took possession of me; and forgetting all the past in respect to Sir Aubrey and myself—forgetting the insults I had received from him—forgetting the aversion I bore him—I started from my seat and abruptly quitted the gallery.

"What is it?" I demanded in a quick tone of fevered excitement, as I stood alone with him in a little corridor which had been constructed behind the galleries.

"Mary, for the love of God, go and save your mistress!" said the Baronet, terribly agitated: indeed his eyes were rolling wildly—his face was ghastly pale—his features were distorted.

"Is she in danger? do you think so?"

"Danger? yes! Danger imminent and terrible! Harlesdon is mad! He is no mock Othello—he is a real one! Oh, if you had seen the bitter looks of diabolic hate, mingled with fiendish triumph, that he just now threw upon me——"

"Oh! what would you have me do?" I asked in the bewilderment of despair. "Good heavens, he dare not injure my poor mistress!"

"He will, he will!" replied Sir Aubrey, quivering with excitement. "O God, I am suffocating with terror—ashes are in my throat——Mary, for heaven's sake, delay not! Fly—speed—rush down to the stage—and save your mistress!"

I waited to hear no more: I had already heard enough—too much. A mortal terror gave wings to my feet—I flew along the corridor—I precipitated myself down the temporary staircase that had been erected—and I reached the great entrance-hall. Thence I had to pass by a circuitous route round to an ante-chamber behind the door communicating with the stage. I suppose that I must have looked pale as a ghost and horrified to a degree; for as I appeared upon that part of the platform which was behind the scenes, several of the gentlemen and ladies who bore parts in the performance, and who were waiting till their turn came to go on again, gave vent to ejaculations of surprise and dismay.

"What is the matter, Mary?" demanded the nobleman who performed Cassio and who knew who I was.

"Let me go—let me go," I said, "to save my mistress!"

"You foolish girl!" he exclaimed, catching me by the arm and holding me forcibly back: "you don't take it for a reality, do you?"

"Yes, yes—too real—too real! Let me go:"—and I burst from him.

"This is too ridiculous," said the gentleman who performed Iago; and seizing me round the waist, he held me back. "Why, how silly you are! And yet this terror on your part is the highest compliment which can be paid to Lord Harlesdon's performance."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, let me go!" I cried, struggling desperately with him.

"Take her away!" cried several of the ladies and gentlemen. "She will be heard in front of the scenes—she will alarm the whole house—she is a fool!"

At this moment a terrible cry, in Lord Harlesdon's voice, but sounding more like the yell of a wild beast, burst upon our ears; and this was instantaneously followed by a hundred other cries of horror and alarm, terror and dismay, on the part of the audience.

"Good God! what is the matter?" exclaimed Iago, suddenly loosening his hold on me: and so sickening a sensation of undefinable agony and horror seized upon me, that I staggered back and sank down against the wall. Had utter silence then prevailed I should no doubt have fainted: but quick as the eye can wink, was I recalled to myself—startled up, I may say, into the keenest susceptibility, the most vivid sensitiveness, by a fresh outburst of cries of horror and consternation. All the gentlemen and ladies in their theatrical costumes by whom I was a moment before surrounded, had rushed upon the stage, whither I now followed them. Good heavens! what a scene of confusion, and terror, and dismay met my eyes! Elegantly-dressed ladies and fashionable gentlemen, great nobles and titled dames, were rushing from their seats in wild horror towards the stage, struggling and jostling pell-mell: the musicians were leaping from their seats in the orchestra; and in the midst of a dismayed and horrified group on the stage, stood Lord Harlesdon in his Moorish guise, apparently under the influence of the most terrible emotions.

"Good heavens!" he was exclaiming. "I felt myself carried away by the part I was performing—I was mad——"

These words filled me with despair. A group, all in agitation and confusion, was collected about the bed. Thither I flew! Utterly regardless of ceremony and even of courtesy, did I thrust aside lords and ladies, peers and peeresses; and then, as I beheld my beloved mistress supported in the arms of two ladies who were endeavouring to recover her, the last fatal conviction struck to my heart—the realization of my presentiments was accomplished—and with a wild terrific scream I threw myself upon the inanimate form of the murdered Lady Harlesdon!

CHAPTER LXVIII.

AFTER THE TRAGEDY.

When I again recovered my senses I found myself lying in bed in my own chamber, with Jemima seated by my side. So slowly did consciousness thus return, that it may be described as the gradual approach of a person bearing a light through a very long dark corridor, or emerging from the extreme depths of a vast subterranean. And by slow degrees, too, as that approaching light would reveal one by one the features of the place through which it was borne, did the lamp of my mind gradually shadow forth the memories of the past until at length I was brought to the recollection that something dreadful had occurred—but what it was I could not instantaneously remember. The next stage at which returning consciousness however arrived, was that last one where it had so suddenly halted and ceased: namely, at the point when the conviction of the tremendous catastrophe had stricken like a mortal blow upon my heart, and when I had flung myself with a despairing shriek upon the body of my mistress.

"Just heavens, Jemima!" I murmured, "is it a dream—a horrible dream?"

But she burst into tears; and then I perceived that she was in mourning.

"Jemima!" I exclaimed, starting up to a sitting posture in the bed—for I felt suddenly galvanized with an unnatural strength; "tell me—tell me—is it true?"

"Alas, too true!" returned the unhappy young woman; and throwing her arms round my neck, she wept bitterly upon my shoulder.

Oh! and I wept bitterly too: for my heart was pierced with lancinating arrows, and I was devoured with a grief such as I had never experienced since that day when my youthful soul was almost rent in twain with the anguish caused by my poor mother's death. Oh! could it be possible? the beautiful, the kind, the generous Lady Harlesdon—was she no more? That beloved mistress, had she departed from this earth? No, no: it was impossible—it appeared to be a dream! Besides, there was too much horror in it to permit me to believe in its reality.

"Jemima, Jemima," I exclaimed, passionately tearing myself away from her embrace and almost flinging her back from me, so that I might contemplate her with attention; "let me look in your face, to read whether your lips have spoken truly."

"Oh, Mary! do you think that I would deceive you?" she said, wringing her hands bitterly. "Look at this mourning-dress—and in the next room the poor little children also in mourning garments—— Oh, it will break my heart! it will break my heart!"

"And mine too," I murmured: and then did a faintness come rapidly over me—every object in the room faded from my view—my senses once more abandoned me.

When I again returned to consciousness, it was night: a candle was burning in the room—the kind and faithful Jemima was seated by my bedside. It instantaneously struck me that some hours must have elapsed since I had last sunk into a state of insensibility; and I found on inquiry from Jemima that such was the case. Then methought all in a moment that perhaps even days had passed since the fearful tragedy of the theatre: for when I again observed my fellow-servant in her mourning, I knew that this dark raiment could not have been made in a few hours.

"How long have I been here—I mean unconscious of what was passing?" I inquired with feverish anxiety.

"You have been ill, dear Mary—very ill," was the response; "and at first your life was despaired of. Indeed, for a whole week——"

"A whole week!" I exclaimed, actually shuddering with affright at this quick lapse of time; "and I unconscious of it. "How long is it since——"

"Do not excite yourself, and I will tell you. It is exactly a fortnight——"

"A fortnight!" I echoed, starting up in the bed. "And what has happened during that time? Lord Harlesdon——"

Jemima shook her head; and bending down towards me, she whispered, "He affects the deepest sorrow for what has occurred."

"But where is he?" I asked with frantic impatience.

"Where should you think, Mary?" inquired Jemima, gazing upon me with astonishment.

"In prison—in Newgate—in a felon's gaol," I answered vehemently; "in a condemned cell—where he ought to be!"

"Good heavens!" cried my fellow-servant, "do you really believe, then——"

"Believe what? That he murdered our dear mistress? Yes, yes," I cried; "I am certain of it!"

"Pray, Mary, do not excite yourself," said Jemima: "this is what you have constantly been saying in your delirium. The doctor left you a composing draught—will you take some?"

"Not I. But pardon me, Jemima—I have no right to be abrupt and petulant with you. My feelings are in a cruel state——Oh, my beloved mistress! my murdered mistress!"—and burying my head in the pillow, I gave vent to the violence of my grief. Those tears relieved me—that outpouring of accumulated anguish eased my heart; and becoming much calmer, I said, "Give me the composing draught, Jemima. I see that you have kindly tended me as my nurse, and I will not reward you with ingratitude. Do forgive me, my dear friend, if I am impatient and abrupt——"

"Don't talk of forgiveness, Mary, where there is no offence," said the good-natured young woman, as she poured me out my draught. "There, that will do you good. You know not how ill you have been—and you must really take care of yourself. At one time you were so bad with the delirium of fever, that I really thought of writing to your friends at Ashford. Indeed, I had penned a letter to that good Mr. Collins of whom you have so often spoken; but your illness took a favourable turn, and so I thought I had better not alarm your brothers and sisters."

"You did wisely, Jemima; and I thank you for so much consideration. But our dear murdered mistress—has her funeral taken place?"

"Hush, dear Mary—do not repeat, now that you are sensible, what you said in your delirium. The term is too severe to be applied to what was accidental——"

"Accidental!" I exclaimed, springing up in the couch with a renewed and still wilder paroxysm of excitement. "You believe that foul and unnatural murder to have been accidental?"

"Mary," answered Jemima, gravely and even reproachfully, "I know that you never liked Lord Harlesdon, and you are aware that I myself have no particular affection for him. But it is really unworthy your natural generosity of disposition to lay such an odious crime at his door; and even if I disliked him a thousand times more than I do, I would not accuse him of such an atrocity."

While Jemima was thus speaking, the remembrance flashed to my mind that she was not so intimately acquainted as I was with the peculiar circumstances which had existed between Lord and Lady Harlesdon; and that whereas she had merely been able to form surmises, I possessed the knowledge of facts. I therefore ceased to wonder so much that she should now be willing to acquit Lord Harlesdon of that extreme turpitude of which I, in the sincerity of my soul, believed him guilty; and I likewise saw the necessity of speaking with more caution than I had just been doing.

"But you have not told me, Jemima," I said, "anything that has occurred during my illness."

"You excite yourself so strangely, Mary——"

"I will be composed—I will listen without interrupting you. Pray speak."

"It is late—past eleven o'clock," observed Jemima. "Had we not better postpone it until the morrow——"

"If you yourself are tired, I will not ask you to sit up any longer," said I. "But——"

"My poor Mary, I see that you would feel disappointed if I did not tell you all you wish to know; and therefore I will do so. If I hesitated for a minute it was only because I feared to excite you: for when the doctor was here just now, he said that you must be kept as quiet as possible."

"I will endeavour not to excite myself any more, dear Jemima. And yet it is hard and it is difficult to repress those feelings——Oh! it appears like a dream! So short a time ago, and our poor mistress was alive! Now——but I will say no more. Go on, Jemima."

"I scarcely know what you want me to do," she said; "but perhaps I had better begin by informing you that there was a coroner's inquest upon our dear lady the day after her death. Lord Harlesdon, though not actually in custody, was certainly considered to be under restraint, so to speak: but he did not offer to leave the house till after the inquest—or rather I should say, he did not stir out till after the funeral."

"But about the inquest, Jemima?"

"The inquiry lasted for at least six hours. Of course there was no doubt that our poor dear lady was——was——suffocated——smothered——with the pillow——"

I could not repress a groan which rose to my lips; and such a cold shudder passed through my frame that I felt as if suddenly enveloped in a winding-sheet of ice.

"Ah! it does you harm to hear me talk of it, Mary!" exclaimed Jemima, sobbing.

"Oh, pray go on! Of course I cannot repress my feelings. But about this inquest, Jemima?"

"A great number of lords and ladies were examined," she continued; "and they every one proved that Lord Harlesdon was so completely carried away by the spirit of the character he was personating, that he appeared to lose his own identity and to become perfectly irresponsible for his actions. In fact, as several of the witnesses said, he seemed during that last terrible scene, to work himself up to a perfect pitch of frenzy——"

"Was Sir Aubrey Clavering examined?" I suddenly asked.

"No—I think not," returned Jemima. "Indeed, I am sure he was not, when I come to reflect. He was to have been; but it appeared that he did not see the last and terrible part of the tragedy——"

"The *real* tragedy," I murmured, with another cold tremor.

"He was taken unwell and went out in the middle of that scene," continued Jemima. "But as I was telling you, all the witnesses were unanimous in declaring that for the time Lord Harlesdon must have been positively beside himself. I was examined, Mary——"

"You, Jemima? And what did you say?"

"I said that I was certainly very much terrified by the vehemence and the passion with which Lord Harlesdon performed his part, and that I really did think that he forgot he was Lord Harlesdon and fancied himself Othello."

"Did you say that he might have had some reason thus to identify himself with that character?"

"What a question, Mary! Of course I said nothing of the sort. But I was asked upon what terms his lordship and our poor dear lady had been recently living; and I said that for some time past they had been on the most affectionate terms possible. Indeed, Lady Davenport fully convinced the coroner that the private theatricals were got up entirely to please our dear deceased lady—that the idea, in fact, was initiated by Lord Harlesdon in her (Lady Davenport's) hearing—and that Lady Harlesdon had adopted it joyfully. All the members of the committee proved that our dear lady had entered with great spirit into the preliminary arrangements; and they every one testified to the perfectly good understanding which subsisted throughout between Lord and Lady Harlesdon. I should also observe that several witnesses proved that on the fatal evening, between all the scenes and acts Lord Harlesdon demonstrated the most delicate attentions towards his wife when in the Green Room, and that just before they went on the stage for the last scene, his lordship patted our dear lady with familiar kindness on the cheek, telling her not to be frightened if he should presently look very fierce and very terrible."

"Were you examined at great length, Jemima?" I asked.

"For not more than ten minutes, and the questions chiefly put to me, were relative to the terms on which my lord and lady had lived together. I told the truth. I said that for some time, while they were upon the Continent, there appeared to be a misunderstanding between them; but that latterly a perfect reconciliation had evidently taken place, and that they had lived not merely in comfort, but in positive happiness."

"And what was the result of the sad inquiry?" I asked.

"Oh! the verdict went to acquit Lord Harlesdon altogether of anything like premeditation," returned Jemima.

"Ah! and you have already told me," I said, "that you believe in the justice of that verdict?"

"How can I do otherwise? I really cannot fancy that his lordship would be so base—so wicked——Besides, after having so completely made it up with our dear lady, it was not likely that he would have all of a sudden turned so savagely vindictive, and availed himself of such an opportunity to commit so dreadful a deed."

"But did you not tell me just now that Lord Harlesdon affects a great deal of sorrow?"

"Yes," rejoined Jemima; "because I don't think he is the man to feel anything so deeply as he appears to feel this. Perhaps I was wrong to say what I did, and even uncharitable: but nevertheless, my idea is that though he must certainly be acquitted of any wicked intent, yet that he is now putting on a little more grief than it is his nature to feel."

"And——and—the interment, Jemima?" I asked in a faltering tone and with suffocating sobs.

"The funeral was conducted with the greatest pomp—I might almost say magnificence—far too much to please me——"

"Was Sir Aubrey Clavering invited to the funeral?"

"No—scarcely! Of course his lordship would not have done that, since he must have known that Sir Aubrey and her deceased ladyship had been talked about. Though his lordship had evidently made it all up with our poor dear mistress during the last two or three months, it was no reason why he should invite the baronet. That would have been rather indecent."

"And the servants generally," said I,—"what do they think of this terrible occurrence?"

"Oh! they all agree in the justice of the verdict—they all think as I do," answered Jemima; "and as *you* must think also, my dear Mary, because you are too charitable to put an evil construction upon anything where none ought to be."

"But the dear children, Jemima," said I,—"do they cry after their poor mother?"

"The boys fret very much; but poor little Bella is of course too young to understand a parent's loss——Ah! that is the hardest part of it, to have to answer the questions which those poor boys put to me! They do not exactly comprehend what death is; and yet they have something more than a vague idea of it."

Jemima burst into tears: my own were already flowing thick and fast again.

"Now, my kind friend," said I, after a pause, during which we both wept much; "I will not keep you up any longer."

"Do you feel inclined to sleep?" asked Jemima: "for if not, I shall stay with you. I and the housemaids have hitherto taken our turns to watch by you; and Mrs. Brandon," alluding to the housekeeper, "has passed many hours by your bedside. But tell me—do you think you can sleep?"

"I will try—you must not sit up any longer."

"I am in the next room to you, my dear Mary, you know; and I will leave the door of communication open, so that if you want anything you can call. And now good night."

Jemima retired into her own room; but ere she sought her couch, she stole in gently to see if I were asleep. I pretended to be so, because I would not keep the good-natured young woman up any longer.

"Poor girl!" she said, as she bent down and kissed me; "she was deeply attached to our dear mistress. God grant that his lordship was not really guilty of such a crime! No, no—I dare not think he was—I dare not, I dare not! And yet, Mary who knows so much——"

But Jemima stopped suddenly short in her audible musings; and retreating to her own room, went to bed.

Long was it ere I closed my eyes in slumber. The image of Lady Harlesdon, as I beheld her stretched lifeless upon that couch on the mimic stage, seemed to rise up before me, and with her looks demand vengeance upon the head of her murderer. For that Lord Harlesdon had murdered her—murdered her too with premeditation—I felt convinced. Indeed, I entertained not a doubt upon the subject. Heaven knows I was not uncharitably inclined; and for a thousand reasons would I rather have believed him innocent: but I could not—because on the other hand a thousand circumstances convinced me of his guilt. The longer I thought upon the whole terrible proceeding—from the very first instant when the idea of the private theatricals was initiated in my presence, until the crowning catastrophe—the more completely did a horrible

clearness enlighten my mind to the reading of all that was dimly obscure and mysterious to the rest of the world. I knew enough of Lord Harlesdon's disposition to be convinced that his very reconciliation with her ladyship was but a blind, not merely to lull her into security, but also to deceive the world when the final blow should be struck. And he had succeeded! The coroner's jury could scarcely have come to any other verdict, considering the evidence adduced at the inquest. Indeed, who would believe that after having treated his wife with a marked kindness—an unwearied attention—an even uxorious tenderness for some time past, he could have wilfully caused her death? Yet *I* knew that he had! Oh, how the world was deceived! But what course was I to pursue? Was this murderer to be left at large? or was he to be brought to justice? Justice indeed! justice was blind in this case—justice could not see his guilt: justice in fact had already proclaimed him innocent! Would justice re-open the case at my instigation? What could I prove? what could I say? Even if I were to tell all I knew in respect to the dark and hateful plottings which Lord Harlesdon had devised wherewith to torture his wife—if I were to make known every incident connected with the transactions in Derbyshire—to what extent would such testimony go? Merely to the effect that Lord Harlesdon had once been bitterly vindictive. But would it not be alleged that he had since done all he could to atone for the past? Yet, again, might not Sir Aubrey Clavering himself prove something of importance? Could not I proclaim the fact, and would not he corroborate it, that on that fatal night he himself had read *murder* in Lord Harlesdon's looks, and that he had anticipated the real tragedy of *Othello?* But what would this prove? Nothing more than that Sir Aubrey Clavering was as frightened as I and many others at the time. Whatever I thought of, an objection started up against it—so that I was compelled to come to the conclusion that though I in my own heart knew Lord Harlesdon to be a murderer, I had scarcely a shadow of evidence to prove him so. Add to this consideration the circumstance that he was a great nobleman, with a host of friends ready to view everything in a light most favourable to his interests and his innocence—and what could I, the humble servant-maid, do towards bringing this powerful peer to justice in the face of the enormous and manifold difficulties that stood in the way?

I cannot help pausing a little longer ere I resume the thread of my narrative to recall attention to those minute details of Lord Harlesdon's conduct towards his wife, which may have escaped the reader's recollection, but which must be regarded as links in the entire chain of a deeply plotted and long meditated plan on his lordship's part for a crowning vengeance against her. Everything had been done to lull her suspicions asleep—every device had been practised to make her believe that his pardon was sincere, that the reconciliation was genuine, and that even he himself was penitent for certain phases of his past conduct. Thus, while still in Derbyshire, he had urged Lady Harlesdon to call upon the Percivals and say civil things on his behalf; and on the return to London he had expressed a desire that I should visit the servants of his household, and that I should even return into her ladyship's service. Nay, more—when he saw me, he had made what appeared to be the most honourable apologies for all that he had made me suffer at his hands. Then, too, he had not merely permitted, but even encouraged my frequent companionship with his wife; and in a thousand little ways he had given me to understand that I must look upon myself rather as her ladyship's friend than her menial. He had seldom allowed me to leave the room when seated with her ladyship; but was wont, with seeming affability and good temper, to remark that he had no secrets to talk about which I might not overhear. Never was conduct fraught with a deeper duplicity: never did the serpent glide more insidiously amongst the flowers that, while marking its pathway, nevertheless concealed its sting. No wonder that her ladyship should have been lulled into a security so false, so groundless! A perfect master in the art of deceit, her husband had played his cards with a consummate tact and a marvellous ingenuity—but as demoniac as it was consummate, and as fiend-like as it was marvellous! And thus until the very last had he led my poor mistress on, even in the intervals of those dramatic scenes which were made accessories to his vengeance,—persuading her to believe that there was nothing in the part of Othello which he at all identified with his own feelings or position,—and ultimately managing the catastrophe with such cold-blooded skill, while affecting all the furious rage of the jealous Moor, as to enable him to accomplish the crowning act of his vengeance not merely with success but also with impunity.

I believe that neither the records of truth nor the imaginings of fiction—neither the book of human nature nor the page of the novelist—ever included such a monstrous crime, so ingeniously devised and so triumphantly carried out. But, ah! was this murderer, all patrician and peer though he were, to live on in his impunity? was he to continue to hold his head high in the presence of the world, feeling himself above the reach of human justice, and defying that of Providence? No, forbid it, heaven!—that heaven whose retribution he appeared to reck not for! Yet again and again recurred the thought that I myself was powerless against the manifold defences with which this bold bad man's guilt was hemmed in around, and that I had none to aid me in exposing his iniquity, bringing it home to him, making it manifest to all the world, and drawing down condign punishment on his head.

These and a variety of kindred reflections occupied my mind day by day for a whole week after I had returned to consciousness. I was still too weak and enfeebled to be able to leave my bedchamber; and yet I longed to quit a mansion where the very atmosphere seemed heavy with the breath and tinged with the hue of murder. But I knew that my life would be risked by a premature removal: indeed, the physician told me so when I hinted my desire to him—and besides, I was so unsettled in my mind that I felt the necessity of resolving on some positive course ere I took my departure. My recovery was materially retarded by the distressed state of my feelings. For several nights successively a cold tremor gradually pervaded my entire being ere I could woo sleep to my eyes: and as I dozed off I kept starting up,

with a vague horror seizing upon me, while my hair appeared to stand on end by the roots. I felt my teeth chattering—my blood curdled and became stagnant in my veins—and a cold perspiration broke out all over me, so that I was bathed as it were in mine own agony. Sometimes, so intolerable were the images of terror which my attenuated fancy conjured up, that I strove to speak—to cry out for Jemima, who slept in the next room: but I invariably felt my tongue clinging to the roof of my mouth and my voice paralysed. I had no power over myself. Sometimes I would lie awake, irresistibly revolving all kinds of horrible things, and fancying that I beheld the shade of my murdered mistress hovering like a bluish cloud—vapoury, dim, and indistinct—around the bed. At other times, and even in the midst of those fits of crucifying agony which I have above described, I would fall off into a heavy sleep: but then would come the strangest and most bewildering dreams, with the spectral image of Lady Harlesdon ever prominent to my mental vision, but with a changed countenance—a countenance, oh! so changed, that it filled me with ineffable terror: for her looks appeared to reproach me for not at once avenging her—and she gazed upon me with eyes, not of azure softness as in her life-time, but with a fixed and unearthly brilliancy that seemed to burn into my soul!

Night after night did these imaginings take place. In the day-time, when I reflected on them, I knew that they were naught save the offspring of a fevered fancy; but as night approached, I trembled at the prospect it brought with it. A thousand times was I on the point of telling Jemima all I endured, and begging her to sleep with me; but my pride restrained me—I did not choose to appear so weak-minded; and besides, what had I myself to fear—I who had never experienced aught save love and kindness towards my dear departed mistress? But again and again, night after night, I saw her in my dreams: and when my frame was torpid and locked up in that profound sleep, she was present to my soul—and in the still hours of the night her spirit charmed herself from the other world to my mental gaze. She haunted my pillow—and her looks appeared to demand vengeance.

The physician found I was recovering so slowly that he began to open his eyes to the reading of the truth—or at least partially so. He accordingly said to me one day, "I understand that you were very much devoted to your deceased mistress, and doubtless your continuous abiding beneath this roof keeps too vividly alive all the impressions of the past. If this be so, you would do well to seek change of scene as soon as possible."

I was only too glad to avail myself of this permission: and feeling the want of complete quietude and retirement, I asked Mrs. Brandon, the housekeeper, if she could recommend me to a respectable lodging for a short time. She happened to have a sister who was a widow and had a house in Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury, which she let out in lodgings, whereby she supported herself. It was represented to me as a quiet, respectable, and well-conducted house; and Mrs. Brandon made inquiries to see whether I could be accommodated there. It fortunately happened that Mrs. Richards (which was the name of her sister) had a bed-chamber on the third floor to let—airy and comfortable, and at a moderate rent. This lodging I therefore engaged; and taking leave of the dear children and the servants at Harlesdon House, I removed thither. His lordship I did not see ere I took my departure—a circumstance which was far more agreeable to me than otherwise.

CHAPTER LXIX.

A MEETING WITH AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

I FOUND Mrs. Richards a kind, good-natured, motherly woman, and that her house was as respectable as it had been represented. She herself occupied the ground-floor: the first floor was tenanted by an old gentleman and his wife who habitually resided in the country, but whom business had brought for a few months to London. The second floor was occupied by a widow lady and her daughter, who had seen much better days, and now were compelled to earn their living by making artificial flowers, copying music, and giving lessons on the piano. There were three rooms on the third floor—two of which were rented by a very eccentric old lady, the widow of an officer in the navy, and whose meagre pension did not allow her to live in better style. The remaining room on this storey was the one which I had engaged; and so far as comfort went, as well as peace and tranquillity, I had nothing to complain of.

I of course wrote to my brother William and Sarah, as well as to Captain Quentin, to tell them that I had left Lord Harlesdon's service and where I was temporarily lodging: but I did not mention a word of those dread accusings which my soul in its deep conviction harboured against his lordship. To my brother and sisters there was of course no use in alluding to the subject; and with respect to Eustace, I felt that after the verdict of the coroner's inquest, the testimony that had been given thereat, and the impression entertained by all the servants of the household in respect to Lord Harlesdon's innocence of premeditation or deliberate intent, it was far too serious a thing for me dogmatically to assert the exact contrary. At all events, for the present I resolved to keep my own counsel and reflect well and maturely upon the course to be pursued. But why had I remained in London? In the first instance because on leaving Harlesdon House I was too weak and ill to travel to Ashford, the only place to which I should have chosen to remove if able to journey at all; and moreover I needed repose and tranquillity for my mind, which I could only acquire in solitude and seclusion. But wherefore, when at the expiration of a fortnight I found myself more composed in mind, and completely convalescent in health, did I still linger in London, nor even think of immediately removing elsewhere? Because there was a presentiment in my soul that every act in the great Harlesdon drama was not yet performed, and that I myself was needed upon the spot to play some farther part therein. In other words, there was a secret voice whispering in my heart that I *must* remain in London for the present—one of those vague, unaccountable, and yet powerful feelings which every one in the course of his life has at some time or another experienced, and which ap-

pear to be a portion of those inscrutable means whereby Providence works out its great purposes and human destinies are accomplished.

It was at the expiration of three weeks after I had taken up my abode in great Russell Street, that Jemima, who had previously called two or three times, came to take tea with me. She could not however remain long away from Grosvenor Square, and having arrived at six was obliged to leave at half-past eight. It was a beautiful evening in the month of June, and she asked me to walk a portion of the way with her. I agreed to do so: yet not liking to be out after dusk in the streets of London, I only accompanied her a short distance—but to be more specific, a little way up Oxford Street. I then bade her good night: we parted—and I hurriedly began to trace my steps homeward. Just as I was crossing the bottom of Tottenham Court Road, from Oxford Street to Great Russell Street, I suddenly beheld by the light of a lamp the well-known figure of the Gipsy Queen. She was dressed in her usual style—a dark stuff gown, with a handkerchief upon her head; and as on previous occasions when I had seen her, she seemed to walk with a dignity of air not unmingled with grace: for she was one of nature's own splendid models, in which elegance to some extent combined with beauty. I know not how it was, but I felt myself suddenly inspired by the instinctive thought that this woman could in some way or another assist me in the realization of those aims, hopes, and purposes which were floating uppermost in my mind. Besides, the recollection of that person who had borne the name of Graham, and whose appearance had produced such a strange impression upon me at the house in St. Giles's, flashed to my mind; and I longed to ask the Gipsy Queen for some more information concerning him.

Moved by these several impulses, I quickened my steps, and was speedily by her side.

"What! my young friend, Mary Price!" she said, with a smile that displayed her brilliant teeth: and taking my hand, she shook it with every appearance of cordial warmth.

"I wish to speak to you," said I, "upon one or two things."

"I know you do," she immediately answered, but in her usual calm, measured, and deliberate manner, as she fixed her superb black eyes upon my countenance as much as to intimate that she could read the secrets of my soul.

"You know that I do?" was the ejaculation which very naturally burst from my lips as I contemplated her with surprise.

"Yes," she rejoined: "there are at least two subjects on which you desire to question me. One is respecting a certain person whom you saw at the house in the Holy Land; and the other is concerning the death of that lady whom you loved so well."

"But how is it possible," I asked, in still deeper astonishment, "that you can thus read my thoughts?"—and I gazed with a species of awe upon this mysterious and incomprehensible woman: for at the moment I felt—especially as the incident of her experiment in palmistry occurred to my mind—as if I stood in the presence of one really invested with some of the powers to which the seions of her race pretended.

"Follow me, Mary Price," she answered: "that is to say, if you are not afraid of accompanying me to the same place whither you have been before."

"Afraid? no!" was my immediate response. "On that occasion you gave me proofs of friendship and good feeling; and I am unconscious of the existence of any reason which could have induced you to change your sentiments towards me."

"They are not changed," she rejoined, with a look of the deepest sincerity. "Why should they be? When we last parted, I told you that if you should ever wish to see me again you could inquire for me at Norwood. That intimation might have given you to understand that I ever held myself in readiness to do you a service, should the opportunity occur. Follow me."

For the benefit of those who may not be well acquainted with London, I must observe that the spot where I thus encountered the mysterious Barbauld Azetha, was close by that densely populated neighbourhood known as St. Giles's; and as she at once plunged into this horrid maze of narrow lanes, dark alleys, and pestiferous courts, I hesitated not to follow her. In the streets surrounding the Holy Land it was perfectly light with the soft glimmer of the summer evening and the artificial aid of the lamps, as well as by the blaze from the shop-windows: but there, in that maze of closely packed buildings, a deep gloom prevailed, save where the bright gas-light shone at the corners of the streets, indicating the presence of public-houses—those palaces of iniquity in the midst of a labyrinth of squalor, wretchedness, filth, and demoralization. At length, in about a quarter of a hour, we reached that house of miserable appearance where I had been before; and the court in which it was situated, appeared as stifling with the heat and as nauseating with sickly odours as on the former occasion when I visited the place. The Gipsy Queen knocked—and the door was opened by her mother, who at once recognized me by the light of a candle which she held in her hand.

"Ah—what! Miss Mary with you again, Barbauld?" said the old Norwood Gipsy, her wrinkled countenance expanding into a smile.

"Yes, mother. Do not keep her waiting," responded the Gipsy Queen: "she wishes to speak to me on some subject of importance."

The old woman made way: the Gipsy Queen took the light from her hand, and conducted me up the ricketty staircase, the boards and bannisters of which seemed as if they had not been swept ever since I was last there. On reaching the landing of the second storey, I cast a somewhat anxious glance at the door of that room where the invalid bearing the name of Graham had lain the last time I was there.

"He is not here now," said the Gipsy Queen, in a low whisper; for she evidently divined the meaning of the look which I had thrown upon that door: then opening the one leading into her own room, she invited me to walk in. I accordingly followed her, and found the chamber wearing exactly the same appearance as when I was last there—which was upwards of a year back. There was the bed with the yellow stuff curtains—the table with the writing materials and books—and the immense volume containing the written entries respecting the circumstances of thousands of families in or about the metropolis.

"Now sit down," said the Gipsy Queen, placing a seat for my accommodation; and taking another chair near me, she continued, "We can converse at our ease; and you may begin to question me upon whatsoever topic you feel most interested in."

"Tell me then," I at once answered,—"and do, I beseech you, speak with solemn truthfulness—that individual whom I saw here——"

"You allude to the man Graham?" said the Gipsy Queen, quietly. "What I told you at the time, was the exact truth. You surely have not since entertained any doubts upon the subject?"

"I know not exactly how to answer you," I said: "for it would be offensive to declare that I did not put implicit faith in the account you gave me of the person alluded to. Yet so strangely striking was the resemblance which he bore to my poor father, that you cannot wonder if there have been moments when I have felt misgivings arise in my mind——"

"It is natural," interrupted the Gipsy Queen; "and yet I can do no more than repeat what I have already told you — that this resemblance which struck you was a mere coincidence, and that the man Graham has been with our tribe as long as I can remember."

I gazed as fixedly upon Barbauld as I dared while she spoke; but in the depths of her fine dark eyes, and in the serene dignity of her very handsome countenance, there was nothing to warrant me in doubting her sincerity. She evidently observed that I thus scrutinized her with attention; and her look as well as her manner was altogether that of one who spoke the truth.

"Upon this point, then," was my observation, after a pause, "I have nothing more to ask. But now, relative to the other topic——"

"The death of Lady Harlesdon," said the Gipsy

Queen. "You believe that she was murdered?"—and she fixed her eyes keenly upon me.

I did not know how to answer: I was afraid of committing myself;—and yet I had almost a perfect confidence in the woman's sincerity and friendship.

"You need not be afraid to express your opinion," she continued: "for mine is already formed upon the subject. Lord Harlesdon as certainly premeditated the murder of his wife, as that you and I are seated together at this present moment:"—and she spoke with the emphasis of one who asserts a known fact or a deep conviction.

"Good heavens! have you any proof of what you say?" I exclaimed: and once more was I struck by the knowledge which this extraordinary woman appeared to possess relative to things in which it was difficult to perceive how she could be so well informed.

"Do you require the proof?" she asked, again fixing her eyes strangely upon my countenance. "And if you possess it, would you help to bring Lord Harlesdon to justice?"

"I would—I would!" were the exclamations which now burst from my lips. "Heaven knows that I am not vindictive, and that my nature is to pardon rather than to persecute! But here is a crime of so black a dye and so monstrous a magnitude, that it would be a sin for any one possessing the power to prove it, to let it go unpunished. The treachery was so dreadful—the cold-blooded cruelty was so unparalleled—the whole plot was characterized by so much systematic villany of a truly satanic nature, that the criminal should not be suffered to escape."

"You speak with energy, Mary," observed the Gipsy Queen, gazing on me with something like admiration in her looks. "Know you not that heaven has marked you out to become the instrument of avenging your loved mistress's most cruel murder? have you not felt an inward prompting which has given you an impulse of this kind?"

"Yes: I have—I have," was my answer.

"And the moment you beheld me this evening, it struck you that it was possible I might give you some assistance?"

"How well you understand my feelings—my thoughts!" I cried, lifting my eyes to Barbauld's countenance with renewed astonishment; and for the moment I felt almost afraid of this woman who in reality appeared to possess powers of no ordinary character.

It was while I was under the influence of this awe-inspired feeling, that she took my hand, and gently drawing off the glove, began to consider the palm as she had done on the former occasion when I was with her in this same house. I dared not withdraw my hand: there was a superstitious feeling upon me at the instant which compelled me to abandon it to her. Taking up a pen from the table, the Gipsy Queen traced the course of the lines on my palm with the feather-end, her look the while being profoundly serious, even to solemnity.

"Yes—the map of your destiny," she at length said, in a voice that suited the seriousness of her looks, "is still a bewildering maze the course of which it is difficult to trace. Did I not tell you that the month of November of last year was one laden with great importance for you? Ah! that meeting with him you loved, and whom you love so devoutly still! But your evil star in respect to this love of your's has continued in the ascendant—yet vibrating not with so malignant a light as that which it shed previously to your meeting. For now you have hopes, young maiden——"

"Oh! tell me, tell me," I exclaimed, with strangely excited feelings of mingled pleasure and terror, "how are you enabled to speak to me thus?"

"On the former occasion when we were together in this very room," responded the Gipsy Queen, "I enjoined you not to question me. I can now only repeat the injunction:"—and as she thus spoke she dropped my hand which for the last few minutes she had been holding in her own. "You love, Mary—you love deeply, fondly, and devotedly," she went on to say in accents that were unmistakably tinged with a soft melancholy. "You know what love is—you have experienced its hopes and fears, its bitterness and its bliss. Love is the ruling divinity of civilized creatures: its power is felt and acknowledged in the palace and the hovel—by the peer and peeress in their sumptuous mansion, and by the swarth gipsy-man and girl pursuing their vagabond career upon the face of the earth. Who has not known and acknowledged the empire of love?"

These last words were uttered with a deepening mournfulness of tone, and with a visible abandonment of the soul to the influence of the reflection. Barbauld's fine person, usually drawn up with a graceful stateliness—a queen-like majesty all her own—slowly drooped as it were, her finely-shaped head inclining forward, her dark eyes bending their looks down, so that they were nearly concealed by their long thick jetty fringes—and her hands catching each other in negligent clasp at the rounded length of her drooping arms. At that moment the Gipsy Queen was the embodiment and personification of more true feeling and of deeper emotion than I could have previously supposed her to be susceptible of; and I could not help asking in a low voice and somewhat timidly, "Do *you*, then, know what love is?"

"Know it!" she exclaimed, suddenly raising her head, while her eyes flashed strange fires, as if diamond-rays were flung forth from the living jet of those magnificent orbs. "Am I a woman, and know not what love is? Am I handsome, and never have been courted? is there nothing about me to inspire love, or to lead you to suppose that I am acquainted with it? Yes, yes: I have loved—and I love still—shall love on for ever and until the end! You ask me, Mary, if I know what love is? Think you that when I behold the beautiful flowers expanding their glories to the sun, I am insensible of the delicious perfume which they shed upon the air? Think you that when I gaze up into the deep blue vault of heaven at night, I take no pleasure in contemplating the vibrating lustre of the silver stars, or that they have no voices which speak to the intelligent spirit that dwells within me? Think you that when the sun glows upon this hemisphere from his meridian height, I feel not the warmth of his rays? Oh, Mary, if you imagine that I have no sense, no faculty, no power of appreciation, for any one of these, *then* may you indeed conclude that I am likewise insensible of love! But if you believe that I possess a heart like other women—an intelli-

gence like the rest of my sex—the same senses, the same faculties, the same power of appreciating all that is bright, beautiful, and delicious in nature,—then must you also be convinced that I am equally susceptible of love—that I can be moved by its charms, conquered by its power, and melted by its tenderness! Oh, Love can be an angel hovering in a sunny atmosphere, scattering flowers from his brow and diamonds from his wing: but he can likewise assume the shape of a fiend, sternly trampling on all the blossoms of the heart! His breath, with the chaste wooings of the zephyr, can inspire the young buds of the soul to expand their beauties to his soft pure kisses—or with the hot glow of unhallowed passion can scorch the flowers of the heart and make them sear, and withered, and parched up. Yes—and on Love's shrine, too, may the light of hope and purest affection burn undimmed and undying, fed by its own eternal incense;—or Love's altar may become a sepulchre of broken hearts, and its oracles but words of doom! Do I not know what love is, Mary? have I not described it?"

It was a strange thing to hear Barbauld Azetha talk thus,—a strange thing indeed to listen to such sentiments coming from the lips of a woman who appeared to lead a wild, peculiar, and unsettled life: but still, as I contemplated her exceedingly handsome person—her intelligent countenance, her expressive eyes, and those wreathings of the well-chiselled lips which gave effect to her eloquent language—I ceased to marvel that the wandering gipsy should have known what love was. To speak the truth, I longed to ask her more,—if she were happy or unfortunate in her love—if she had been married, or expected to be married to its object,—in a word, to put all those questions which the curiosity and interest with which she had inspired me, naturally suggested. But I dared not: she gave me no further encouragement to speak upon the point—and I feared to intrude on the sanctuary of her thoughts.

"Mary," she suddenly exclaimed, as if shaking off a tenderness of mood into which she had been unconsciously betrayed, but which she was now sorry she had exhibited; "we must talk no longer relative to myself! Besides, time passes; and knowing the purity of your character, I am well aware that you do not choose to remain until too late an hour away from your place of residence. One word more, therefore, will suffice for the purpose of our present interview. You feel that you have been marked out by heaven to bring a foul assassin to condign punishment—and it is for me to succour you. Inform me of the place of your abode, and in a few days you shall receive a note giving you an appointment with me. I may then be able to tell you more."

I named the address of Mrs. Richards' house in Great Russell Street, near at hand; and the Gipsy Queen volunteered to accompany me as far as the door of that dwelling. Before I had even time to thank her for this kindness, she rose from her seat, plucked the handkerchief from her head, and opening the large trunk which stood in the room, drew forth a bonnet and shawl, which she at once put on. She likewise put on a pair of gloves; and when thus equipped in a style which gave her the appearance of a respectable tradesman's wife or daughter, she conducted me forth from the house. All was silent, and all appeared to be dark in the rooms which we passed while descending the stairs: I therefore concluded that she and her mother alone tenanted that dwelling on the occasion of this visit of mine. To be brief, Barbauld Azetha escorted me through the labyrinth of streets and alleys in which I should have been lost without her guidance; and within a few minutes I found myself in Great Russell Street.

The Gipsy Queen waited at the door until Mrs. Richards's servant opened it, and then she wished me good night. I fully appreciated her considerate motive in thus tarrying, so that it should not appear as if I had wandered through the streets by myself at that time of night. I ascended to my own chamber, wondering more than ever at the strange character of the Gipsy Queen, and infinitely perplexed as to her means of obtaining information on so many subjects of interest to myself.

CHAPTER LXX.

HYDE PARK.

A WEEK elapsed, during which interval I heard nothing from Barbauld Azetha; and though I was a prey to the utmost suspense, and felt cruelly disappointed every time a postman knocked at the door and went away leaving not the expected letter for me, yet I was assured that she had neither meant to trifle with me, nor had forgetten her promise. At last the wished-for communication arrived. I at once recognized the handwriting of the Gipsy Queen, which I have said on a former occasion (when she penned me the certificate that I subsequently sent to Lady Harlesdon) was characterized by an elegance and a fluency perfectly lady-like. I hastily tore it open, and found its contents to be as follow:—

"To-morrow evening at nine o'clock precisely, I shall call for you in a hackney-coach. As you will be perhaps two hours away from your lodgings, and may wish to account for such absence at so late an hour, I shall come in a dress which will give me the appearance of a small tradesman's wife, and I shall send up the name of *Mrs. Simpson*. You recollect that it served me to make an inquiry concerning you at another place and on a former occasion.

"Your's affectionately and faithfully,
"BARBAULD AZETHA."

That I completely bewildered myself in conjectures as to what course the Gipsy Queen intended to pursue, the reader may easily imagine: but that all my suppositions were thrown away, may be likewise conceived. Nor need I dwell farther upon my thoughts and reflections during the interval which elapsed until the appointed hour came. I was ready dressed at nine o'clock on the evening following the day on which I had received the letter; and punctually at that hour did a hackney-coach drive up to the house. Then the servant ascended to inform me that "Mrs. Simpson had come to fetch me to sup with her:" and I lost no time in tripping down stairs. The Gipsy Queen, dressed as she told me she should be, was seated inside the hackney-coach, and welcomed me in a manner suitable to the part she was playing so long as the servant-girl

remained on the threshold. The hackney-coachman closed the door of the vehicle, mounted his box, and drove off. He had already received his instructions, and therefore knew in which direction to proceed.

"What are you going to do? and whither are we repairing?" I asked of the Gipsy Queen, as I sat by her side in the vehicle.

"Put no questions to me—but wait the issue of events," she answered. "Depend upon it that I shall not lead you, dear Mary, into any embarrassment or error."

We then continued to converse for a few minutes on indifferent subjects: but I soon ceased speaking, and fell into a train of conjectures as to the probable end and aim of the Gipsy Queen's proceeding. I did not notice in which direction the hackney-coach went: but in a very short time it drew up by the side of some high railings, which I speedily recognized as those of Hyde Park.

"Here we must alight," said the Gipsy Queen: and we descended accordingly. She dismissed the vehicle, and then conducted me into the Park. She looked out for a particular seat in the neighbourhood of Grosvenor Gate, and stopping there, said, "We must remain until the person whom I am expecting joins us."

"And whom are you expecting?" I asked, with no small degree of curiosity.

"Hush! you will see in a moment. She is already approaching."

She! Then it was some female for whom we were waiting; and looking in the direction to which the Gipsy Queen's eyes were turned, I beheld the form of a woman advancing towards us. As she drew near I observed that she was handsomely dressed, though evidently with a view to disguise; for she wore a veil closely folded over her countenance. By the stoutness of her figure and by her walk, I conjectured she must be of a matronly age; and that she was of no mean rank I likewise supposed—for in spite of certain evidences of hesitation and even alarm as she approached, it was not difficult to recognize the gait, mien, and air of a well-bred person.

"Lady Davenport?" said the Gipsy Queen, rising from the bench and advancing a step or two to meet her.

"Yes—it is I," responded her ladyship. "But what do you want with me? wherefore that letter so threatening—so ominous?"

"Did it not assure you that no harm was intended to yourself, provided you came to the appointment which it gave?" asked the Gipsy Queen.

"Yes—true!" responded Lady Davenport, but still in a nervous and almost hysterical manner. "Tell me, however, what you want with me? Who are you? and who is this with you? What, Mary Price!" she exclaimed, as the starlight now revealed my countenance to her. "Good heavens! what is the meaning of all this mystery? Can it be that——"

And she stopped suddenly short. I myself was totally unable to explain the matter: I was as much a prey to astonishment as her ladyship, though of course I shared none of her alarm. At the first glimpse of the present proceeding, I could not for the life of me conjecture how it was that the Gipsy Queen hoped to make Lady Davenport the means of bringing his guilt home to Lord Harlesdon: yet as the recollection flashed to my mind how conspicuous a part her ladyship had played on the committee of management in respect to the private theatricals, I began to have some glimmering idea that she perhaps might know more of Lord Harlesdon's treacherous turpitude than I had previously imagined.

"Shall we sit down? or shall we walk while we converse?" asked the Gipsy Queen. "It is for your ladyship to decide. But perhaps it would be better to sit down, as our discourse is not only to turn on a very serious topic, but may likewise last some time."

Lady Davenport threw a hurried glance around her, with the nervous trepidation of one who has not altogether a clear conscience, and who knows not exactly what is about to take place, yet apprehends some mischief: then as if making up her mind with a sudden effort, and being anxious to seek prompt relief from a most unpleasant state of suspense, she sat down upon the bench.

"Mary Price," she said, "tell me what all this means. Who is this it that you have with you? You surely cannot mean me any harm?"

"Permit *me* to speak," observed the Gipsy Queen, resuming her place upon the bench in such a way that Lady Davenport was between us. "As yet Mary Price knows nothing of what I am about to say or do. It was I who wrote that letter to your ladyship enjoining you to meet me here this night, and to come alone, if you would wish to avoid exposure in a certain matter nearly concerning your honour and reputation."

"And that certain matter," said her ladyship quickly,—"to what do you refer?"

"I am sorry to find," answered the Gipsy Queen, "that your conscience has more than one thing weighing upon it and making it afraid. However, that is no business of mine. It is relative to Lord Harlesdon that I have bid you meet me here."

"I thought so," resumed Lady Davenport, with the air of one who receives the confirmation of a most unpleasant suspicion. "Yes—I thought so the instant I beheld Mary Price. But good heavens! you cannot for an instant suppose that——No, no—you cannot!" and she again stopped short suddenly.

"Lady Davenport," said the Gipsy Queen, "you had better throw off all excitement and listen to me. The evening before last—at this very hour—and in another part of this very Park—you met Lord Harlesdon. He was followed at a distance by some one having good reasons to watch him. That person was myself. When you sat down to converse together, I stole near enough to gather all that passed between you."

"Good heavens!" cried Lady Davenport, in mingled anger and alarm. "But this was abominable! And yet I must not upbraid you—I must not give way to my feelings: for I see that I am completely in your power. Go on, go on," she added nervously: "what do you wish with me? Speak—speak at once."

"Lady Davenport," resumed Barbauld Azetha, in her wonted style of measured gravity and impressiveness, "the intimacy which, from your conversation of the night before last, has subsisted between Lord Harlesdon and yourself for many years, is no concern of mine; and assuredly it is not merely for the purpose of taunting you with it that

we have met here on the present occasion. But during that conversation between yourself and his lordship, allusions were made to a subject involving a deep and fearful interest."

"But you heard nothing which can lead you to suppose," interrupted Lady Davenport, still in great excitement, "that I knew what was to take place? And surely, surely you cannot think that Lord Harlesdon himself intentionally did it?"

"I perceive you know full well to what I am alluding," said the Gipsy Queen; then in a still more solemn strain she went on to observe, "By the conversation which I overheard between yourself and Lord Harlesdon the night before last, amongst the trees on yonder side of the Park, you yourself have been tortured by the deepest and direst misgivings in respect to Lord Harlesdon and that fearful tragedy. Yes, lady—I acquit you altogether of any criminal knowledge of what was to be the crowning catastrophe of those private theatricals: but during the preliminary arrangements you suffered yourself to be made an instrument and an accomplice in working out a part of his lordship's cunning scheme of deep-laid villany. Listen—and do not interrupt me: for there are things which it is needful I should recapitulate. You met Lord Harlesdon, as I have already stated—met him according to a pressing letter which you had written to him. Such did I glean from your discourse. He asked you the meaning and the object of so much mystery—so much secrecy. You told him that you could no longer endure the torture of those feelings which were tearing your heart and destroying your peace—that you had resolved upon having explanations with him—but that as he was now a widower, you could not visit him at his own house, and that as he was in mourning it would not be seemly for him to call upon you or any other acquaintances for the present—and moreover as the topic on which you had to speak was one of such fearful import, for all these reasons you had proposed a meeting in a spot and at an hour when there was no chance of being seen or overheard. He was much troubled at all you said to him: but *you* were still more troubled, Lady Davenport, as you reminded him of certain past incidents. And these incidents I must now recapitulate. You first of all bade him remember how he had made use of you to bring about certain arrangements in respect to the theatricals—how on the first day the idea was broached in Lady Harlesdon's presence, he had bade you beforehand call at Harlesdon House at a particular hour, when he would be in the way—and how he himself undertook that you should obtain access to his wife's own private sitting-apartment, she at the time having refused to receive visitors. You next reminded him, Lady Davenport, how he had prompted you to insist that both himself and Lady Harlesdon should take part in the performances: and you bade him recollect that you had done so. You then went on to recapitulate how, as a member of the committee of management, you had followed Lord Harlesdon's directions by advancing all the arguments you could think of in favour of *Othello*, and against every other drama which might be selected. You likewise reminded him that it was through his secret promptings you had taken such active though private measures to influence the other ladies and gentlemen of the committee to assign the character of Othello to himself, and that of Desdemona to his wife. And lastly, you bade him recall to mind how it was through his private suggestion to yourself that you recommended an invitation to be sent to Sir Aubrey Clavering, as his lordship had particular reasons (which you, Lady Davenport, knew full well) for wishing that gentleman to be present at the performance. All these circumstances, one after another, did you the night before last, in my hearing, recall to Lord Harlesdon's recollection—as if it were needful for such recalling!—and then you expressed your dire apprehension that he had all along meditated his wife's death, and that every step which was taken had been so devised as to lead insensibly but surely on to that result. To do you justice, Lady Davenport," continued the Gipsy Queen, "you expressed the most fervid hope that your terrors were unfounded; and you besought from Lord Harlesdon's lips the assurance that they were so. You told him that though heaven knew how innocent you were of conspiring to the accomplishment of his wife's death, yet that considering the part you had enacted in combining the circumstances which led to that unfortunate result, her death lay heavy upon your conscience. Nay, more—you likewise assured his lordship that you felt you had not told all you might have told before the coroner—for that you had suppressed all the incidents of which you had been reminding his lordship, and which I have just recapitulated. You therefore besought him to swear to you, by the great God above your heads, that he was innocent of a premeditated murder! Is not all this true, Lady Davenport?" demanded the Gipsy Queen: "and have I not given a faithful summary of that discourse which I overheard between Lord Harlesdon and yourself?"

"It is so—it is so," responded Lady Davenport, evidently much perplexed and cruelly bewildered. "But if you overheard all that you have recapitulated, you likewise heard that Lord Harlesdon *did* swear!"

"Yes," resumed the Gipsy Queen: "it is true that he took the oath which you demanded. But were you satisfied by that oath? Did it not occur to your ladyship that the man who would commit murder, was but little likely to hesitate at perjury? And did you not notice that there was a subdued tone in his accents—a tremulous quickness in his voice at the time he took that fearful oath—as if he felt the stupendous turpitude of the crime he was committing, and shuddered inwardly lest the vengeance of an outraged heaven should fall upon his head and strike him down a corpse then and there!"

"There is something in your words which terrifies me," said Lady Davenport, clutching with hysterical nervousness at the Gipsy Queen's arm: then abruptly turning round to me, she exclaimed, "Mary Price, to what is all this to lead? Good heavens! if a dark deed has been done, you see that I was innocent of it. It is true—yes, I will not deny it—that when I lent myself, at Lord Harlesdon's private suggestion, to the task of influencing those little arrangements on the part of the committee, I knew that his lordship purposed to avenge himself upon his wife for her infidelity: but heaven knows how far, how very far I was from foreseeing the frightful result! Methought that it was a vengeance to be confined to words, and to be wreaked through the medium of the terrible language which

the part he had to perform would put into Lord Harlesdon's mouth. And, oh! with sorrow and shame do I confess it now, that disliking Lady Harlesdon in the secrecy of my soul, I revelled in her mortification. But as for murder——Oh, the dreadful word! ——God knows I was not a willing accomplice in *that!* Besides, we must not believe that Lord Harlesdon himself——"

"Lady Davenport," interrupted the Gipsy Queen, solemnly and even sternly, "do not endeavour to blind yourself to your own convictions. There is no sophistry nor wilfulness that can effectually enable you to do that. You know—you feel—that at the bottom of your soul there rests the dread certainty that Lord Harlesdon *has* committed a wilful and deliberate murder!"

Lady Davenport gasped as if about to reply; but the words she would have uttered died upon her lips; and she sat confounded—overwhelmed with an awful consternation.

"Yes," continued the Gipsy Queen, "from the way in which you spoke the night before last—all the flippancies and frivolities of fashionable conversation being laid aside, and your language and manner at one moment being earnest and another impassioned—it was but too evident to me that in the depths of your heart dwelt the conviction of Lord Harlesdon's guilt. But wherefore, then, did you seek that interview with him? and why did you bid him swear to his innocence? I will tell you. It was in the hope that the result would be a salve to your own conscience, and a means of soothing the tortured feeling which, with nature's own eloquence, you so truthfully depicted. Now, Lady Davenport, can you deny that in your soul you entertain the assurance of Lord Harlesdon's deepest, blackest guilt?"

"Heavens! if I answer you, what will be the result?" said the unhappy Lady Davenport, now weeping bitterly and wringing her hands.

"And if you do not answer, the result will be precisely the same," rejoined the Gipsy Queen. "For can you not conjecture the purpose of this present interview? It was merely that you might admit in the presence of a witness the truth of all those details which I overheard the night before last and which I have recapitulated now. And that witness is there—by your side—Mary Price!"

"But, good God!" exclaimed Lady Davenport, "if you carry this matter any farther, you will expose me—you will ruin me! Reflect—Oh, reflect, I beseech you! I have a husband who will spurn me from his presence—I have two grown-up daughters on whose heads my dishonour would redound——Expose me not, I beseech you! for the love of heaven expose me not:"—and the unhappy woman clasped her hands in the agony of her feelings.

The Gipsy Queen spoke not a word; but whether her silence was to be taken as a proof that she was inexorable so far as she felt herself interested or concerned—or on the other hand, that she left the matter entirely to my judgment and discretion, I know not. For myself, I was profoundly moved. I felt for this unhappy woman whose frailty had thus involved her in such a terrible embarrassment: I felt also for her husband and her daughters—though the former was a proud overbearing man (I had frequently seen him at Harlesdon House) and the latter were frivolous, hollow-hearted young women. Yet I pitied them all, I say—even including this wretched Lady Davenport herself, though she had evinced no pity towards my poor mistress, but, to use her own worde, had revelled in her mortification at the taunts and upbraidings of Lord Harlesdon as Othello. But with all this pity, what was I to do? how was I to act? the bewilderment was cruel—the perplexity was torturing. There were now the means of bringing Lord Harlesdon to justice and proving his cold-blooded premeditation of the murder of his wife; and it were impossible, if all the details previously recapitulated were brought forward against him, that he could escape condemnation. But in punishing him for his guilt, the criminal intimacy which, as it appeared, had so long subsisted between himself and Lady Davenport would be fully exposed, and such exposure was sought not by me. On the other hand, to save her ladyship from this exposure, and to avoid plunging an entire family into distress and disgrace, it would be necessary to leave Lord Harlesdon in his impunity—to allow the murderer to remain at large and unpunished.

Such was the flight of thoughts that swept rapidly through my mind, as Lady Davenport turned in an appealing manner towards me; while the Gipsy Queen remained locked up in so dubious a silence.

"Mary, Mary, I entreat—I conjure you," cried the wretched woman, "to spare me this frightful exposure. I know that I have done wrong in acting at the time against your deceased mistress; but heaven can testify that it was without dreaming of the dread result. Mary, I beseech you to spare me ——Oh, spare me—spare me—and I will pray for you as long as I live—I will do anything I can to serve you—gold shall be lavished upon you——"

"Lady Davenport," I interrupted her with indignation, "if you address me in these terms you will destroy whatever amount of sympathy I may at present experience towards you."

"Oh! then you do feel sympathy in my behalf?" exclaimed Lady Davenport, seizing one of my hands and holding it in both her own; "and you will not ruin me beyond redemption? I know you possess a good heart, Mary—I know that you loved your mistress, and that it is natural you should seek to punish him who caused her death—if he really did it deliberately and with premeditation. But it will be a poor consolation to you to reflect that in striking this blow against him, you prostrated me at the same time—broke my husband's heart—and brought down disgrace upon my children. Mary, Mary, do not this amount of mischief, I beseech you!"

While Lady Davenport was thus speaking, a thought which in an indirect manner was favourable to her own cause—that cause which she was pleading so energetically and so imploringly—arose in my mind; and I wondered, as it rapidly developed itself, that it had not occurred to me before. If this matter were fully prosecuted—if Lord Harlesdon were brought to justice—if justice did its duty—and if the law were allowed to take its course, the wretched man would be consigned to the scaffold. The scaffold—Oh! how could I become instrumental in dooming a fellow-creature to death? for I abhorred the barbarian and brutal display of the gibbet—I entertained the firm conviction that the punishment of death was unchristian in itself,

useless as an example, and demoralizing in its effects upon society,—a horror and an atrocity revolting to every well-constituted mind. Thus, even before Lady Davenport had finished that last speech, I had made up my mind not to push this affair to the utmost extremity. The Gipsy Queen still remained profoundly silent; and I consequently felt that the destiny of Lord Harlesdon and the honour of Lady Davenport remained entirely in my own hands.

"Humble an individual as I am," said I, now breaking silence, "much depends upon the course I may think fit to adopt in this terrible combination of circumstances. Lady Davenport, I do not wish to expose you to the world: but this feeling which I entertain is rather on behalf of your family than yourself—for your own conduct towards my dear deceased mistress was detestable in the extreme. No, not exactly in the extreme—for I acquit you of any willing and intentional complicity in the stupendous crime that sent her prematurely to the grave. As for Lord Harlesdon himself, I have no pity for him—no, not the least! Indeed I feel that I could be remorseless and merciless towards him. But there is this one grand consideration that sways me—namely, I cannot become instrumental in sending a fellow-creature to the scaffold. But on one condition alone will I keep silence, and induce my companion here to keep silence also."

"And that condition?" cried Lady Davenport eagerly—her accents trembling too with an ill-concealed joy; for she doubtless saw that she was safe from the exposure which had seemed to threaten her a few minutes back.

"Lord Harlesdon," was my response, "cannot be allowed to go altogether unpunished. Though not holding the opinion that society has a right to demand his life, yet I *do* hold the opinion that society would be wronged were he allowed to escape altogether with impunity. Therefore let his punishment be an eternal exile from his country. In the ordinary course of nature he cannot have many years to live: let those years, whatever their number, be passed in expatriation. Lady Davenport, you can make known this sentence to him—a sentence which I do not pronounce with the arrogance or vanity of a self-constituted judge, but which heaven ordains through the medium of my lips—that heaven which has shown its resolve that the guilt of this wicked man should be fully brought home to him!"

"Hark—a footstep!" suddenly whispered the Gipsy Queen, whose quick ear had caught the sound ere it struck either mine or Lady Davenport's. "Yes—footsteps! and close behind us, too!"

"Aye—and of one who has listened to all that has passed!" exclaimed a voice which I instantaneously recognized: and as we all three started up from the bench, he who had thus spoken appeared before us.

It was Sir Aubrey Clavering.

"You say, Mary Price, that Lord Harlesdon shall be saved?" he continued, in a quick and almost furious tone—for he was dreadfully excited. "But no—by heaven, he shall die! If there be law and justice in the land, they shall reach him. What? this long and bitter persecution of a young and lovely creature—no, no, it shall not go unpunished! It is true she was faithless to him: but was not he the while carrying on his own intrigue likewise? Yes—with you, Lady Davenport—with you, one of his wife's enemies! Ah! and in his cold-blooded cruelty he had me invited to his mansion that I might behold him murder his wife! What? such diabolic conduct as this to go unpunished! No, by heaven! if ever the gibbet be again raised in England, it shall be built up for him!"

And having given utterance with frightful energy and whirlwind rapidity to this volley of words—his countenance ghastly and distorted the while—Sir Aubrey Clavering rushed away, and in a moment was lost in the obscurity of the evening.

"This must not be!" I shrieked forth: and not knowing what I did, I flew in pursuit. But scarcely had I sped a dozen yards when my foot tripped against a stone—I fell forward as if stricken by lightning—and with the rapidity of that same lightning's disappearance from the sky on a night of storm, did consciousness abandon me.

CHAPTER LXXI.

HARLESDON HOUSE.

When I regained my senses, I found myself supported in the arms of Barbauld Azetha, who was kneeling by my side on the grass where I had fallen. I felt a dreadful pain in the head—the result of the concussion which had stunned me: but beyond this I had sustained no injury.

Rising to my feet, I glanced around. Lady Davenport lay close to the bench; and it immediately struck me that she must have swooned through terror at Sir Aubrey Clavering's fearful threat—a threat which, if carried out, would produce the exposure she so much dreaded.

"You have left her to herself—and she has fainted!" I said to the Gipsy Queen, almost in a tone of reproach: for in the bewilderment of the moment I regarded it as an unkind act on her part.

"I could not attend to both," she replied hastily and in an agitated manner: "and I preferred attending to you."

"Ah! my generous friend, and I upbraided you!" said I, snatching her hand and pressing it warmly. "But let us hasten and attend to her ladyship."

No sooner said than done—and in a few moments Lady Davenport, whom we lifted from the ground and supported between us, began to revive.

"How came Sir Aubrey Clavering here?" said I, now struck by the singularity of the circumstance as my ideas disentangled themselves from the confusion into which they had been thrown.

The Gipsy Queen made no answer: but I saw by the star-light that she looked agitated and even frightened—a circumstance that struck me as being significant enough in one naturally so cool and self-possessed as Barbauld Azetha.

"Is it possible," I exclaimed, "that you——"

"Give not vent to any injurious suspicion," said the Gipsy Queen, instantaneously recovering her wonted composure, and addressing me with that species of majestic imperiousness which on occasions she was accustomed to adopt.

"Pardon me if I had wronged you in thought," was my quick rejoinder.

She flung upon me a glance to imply that I was forgiven—but she said nothing; and notwithstanding her words and looks, which were equivalent to a denial to my half-expressed accusation, I still felt a doubt and misgiving in my mind.

"O heavens! is it a dream?" now exclaimed Lady Davenport, the tide of whose recollections had rushed back to her brain. "No, no—it is a horrible reality! Hasten, I implore you—prevent an exposure——Mary Price, you are pledged to a particular course——Oh, my husband! my children! ——haste—fly, I beseech—I implore you! Go, dear Mary—go, my good girl, I conjure you—I will wait here till your return."

"I will go," said the Gipsy Queen: and she was already hurrying away when that same misgiving which had lingered in my mind, fired up all in a moment into a perfect blaze of suspicion, and I cried out, "I will accompany you then!" To Lady Davenport I hurriedly said, "Stay here till my return. At all events you shall know the worst:" —and the next instant I was by the side of Barbauld Azetha.

She said not a word—and we sped onward together. Grosvenor Square was close at hand; and a very few minutes brought us to Lord Harlesdon's mansion. The front-door stood wide open; and by the brilliant light of the gas-lamps which burnt over the portico, as well as by the flood of lustre pouring forth from the hall, I at once perceived the well-known figure of Sir Aubrey Clavering. The hall-porter was likewise upon the threshold: but no words appeared to be passing between them at the moment—the air and attitude of the Baronet indicating that he was pondering in uncertainty what course to pursue. That his excitement had abated, or was at least masked and concealed for the moment, instantaneously struck me; and I was glad of it—

for it seemed to promise that matters might yet end without an explosion.

"And you say that his lordship is not at home?" observed Sir Aubrey, suddenly raising his head from its downward look of contemplativeness: and these words caught my ear at the very instant that I and the Gipsy Queen reached the steps leading up to the mansion.

"I have already had the honour of telling you three times, sir, that his lordship went out an hour ago, without saying where he was going:"—and the hall-porter gazed with mingled curiosity and surprise upon Sir Aubrey Clavering, whose look and manner, as well as the circumstance of repeating his inquiry after Lord Harlesdon so often, had naturally struck the old man as singular, if not ominous.

"Then I will walk in and wait his lordship's return," said the Baronet, as if suddenly making up his mind how to act: and he was entering the hall, when happening to look around him—perhaps to ascertain whether he had been pursued from the park—he caught sight of me and my companion. "Ah!" he ejaculated; and hastily running down the steps, he demanded, addressing himself to me, "What do you want? why will you interfere farther in this business? It rests with me *now*—— with me *alone!*"

I perceived that his excitement was rising again; and I at once said, "Sir Aubrey Clavering, it is absolutely necessary that you should listen to reason——"

"Ah, reason?" he echoed scornfully. "Can you teach it me? Well, perhaps I had better hear what you have to say:"—and then turning sharply round upon the Gipsy Queen, he said, "Barbauld, go—leave us."

I was struck with astonishment at the manner in which Sir Aubrey Clavering thus addressed her—a mannner of mingled familiarity and command; and notwithstanding the excited state of my feelings on account of other matters, I was curious to observe how she took it. I beheld the colour mantle upon her cheeks and her eyes for an instant flash fire. Instinctively my glance travelled back to Sir Aubrey Clavering; and I caught him making an imperious sign for her to obey him. Again I looked at her—and now she seemed to hesitate: but all in an instant, as if feeling that the scene must be put an end to, she said in a strange deep voice, and also with a look the full meaning of which I could not comprehend, "One word, Sir Aubrey Clavering—one word aside—and I will depart."

The Baronet, with an evident gesture of impatience, hurried to the distance of half-a-dozen yards, Barbauld Azetha by his side. They paused and conversed together in low whispers for about a minute, at the expiration of which Sir Aubrey came back to me, and the Gipsy Queen, waving her hand in token of adieu, hurried rapidly away. She did not take the direction of the Park; and so I at once concluded that she did not intend to trouble herself any more about Lady Davenport or the business that was in progress.

"Now," said Sir Aubrey Clavering to me, "I am at your service. But I do not intend to move away from this house until——"

"Hush!" I said, not choosing the hall-porter to hear what was menacing his master. "There is no necessity, sir, for you to leave this place unless you choose. I am not denied entrance thither; and with your permission will accompany you to some room where we may converse."

"Be it so," rejoined Sir Aubrey: and springing up the steps, he said to the hall-porter, "I mean to wait for his lordship's return."

"And I also," I immediately interjected. "But I have a few words to say to Sir Aubrey Clavering in private. Allow me to accompany him into the parlour."

The hall-porter stared at me with all his eyes: but I gave him a look which was as much as to imply that some matter of deep importance was involved in the present proceeding—and the good old man knew me too well and also had too high an opinion of me to suppose for an instant that it was through any friendly feeling towards the Baronet I wished to speak in private with him.

To be brief, in a few moments I found myself alone with Sir Aubrey Clavering in a parlour opening out of the hall. Yes—I was alone with that man whom of all others, under different circumstances, I should have most dreaded to be alone with—a man at whose hands I had endured persecution and suffered injury—a man who had tried to blast my reputation as well as lure me from the path of virtue—a man, in fine, whose character and conduct were in every way calculated to inspire me with aversion, mistrust, and terror. But all these things were scarcely remembered at the present moment. I felt not afraid of him—and my thoughts were far too otherwise occupied even to allow me leisure to reflect that I disliked him. Assuredly I experienced no feeling in his favour: but such was the agitation of my mind—such the hurry of my brain—that I only beheld him at the instant as an individual bent upon doing something from which I had strong reason to dissuade him.

"Now, Mary," he said—but not flippantly nor insolently—no, *he* also had appeared to have lost sight of the past so far as it concerned our two selves alone—"what have you to say to me? You have heard my intentions—you know that I am a man to carry them out. I tell you, Mary, that if Lord Harlesdon had a thousand lives and I had the power to take them all, I would not leave him one—no, not one!"

"Sir Aubrey Clavering," I asked, with a mixture of solemnity and excitement—for at that moment there was a deep earnestness in the midst of my agitation,—"is it the deceased Lady Harlesdon whose death you purpose to avenge?"

"Aye—and my own wrongs also!" he replied almost fiercely. "For *I have* wrongs to be thus avenged. What? the cold-blooded villain who arranged all that diabolic plot to gratify his insatiate thirst for vengeance—shall he not be made to feel likewise what vengeance is? Never, never shall I forget the satanic looks of hatred—the fiend-like glances of malignity, which he flung upon me when performing that terrible part that he enacted with such fearful truth. Ah! the whole scheme was as much devised for me as for the dead Clementina. But we will both be avenged!"

Having spoken these last words between his set teeth and with a concentrated rage, Sir Aubrey Clavering began to pace to and fro in the apartment with agitated and uneven steps. As the reader will

remember, he was quite a young man; and it was truly painful to behold one of his youthful years thus giving way to an infuriate wrath. The countenance which naturally had not a single wrinkle, was now distorted into deep lines, as he walked to and fro like a lion chafing in his cage; and evidently altogether forgetting my presence, he went on giving utterance to threats terribly vindictive against Lord Harlesdon. I did not interrupt him—I said not a word—but kept apart and silent in a corner of the room, waiting till this tornado of passion should have passed over. But I began to think that I might vainly await the return of a calm: for the longer Sir Aubrey Clavering gave way to his excited thoughts, the greater was the empire which passion seemed to obtain over his reason. All of a sudden he noticed me; and stopping short, said, "Well, Mary, why do you remain silent? are you afraid of me? By heaven! you never were more assured of being left at peace by me than at this moment: for I have no thought for anything save the business which I have come hither to execute."

"And that business?" said I, not thinking it worth while to notice the former portion of his remarks.

"That business?" he echoed. "You know it! It is to give a murderer into custody—to arrest him with my own hand—to summon his servants that they themselves may turn policemen to drag him off to a felon's gaol!"

"Will you—can you, listen patiently and tranquilly to a few words?" said I, seeing that it was useless to await a calmer moment, and also reflecting that as time was passing Lord Harlesdon might return ere I had been able to dissuade Sir Aubrey from his purpose.

"Well, speak then—and I will endeavour to listen. Proceed."

"You have said, Sir Aubrey Clavering," I resumed, "that you seek to avenge the deceased lady whom you loved—and also to avenge what you call your own wrongs. But reflect well on the part you are about to perform. If Lord Harlesdon be given into custody and a judicial inquiry takes place, every incident of the past will transpire; and many things not creditable to yourself will thus come to light."

"To what do you allude?" demanded Sir Aubrey. "That I loved Lady Harlesdon—that I intrigued with her——Ah! believe me, there is nothing in all this discreditable to a man of the world!"

"But it may be held discreditable, Sir Aubrey Clavering," said I, "that at the time you were poor and without prospects you counselled her whom you loved to marry this old nobleman——Need I say any more?"

"No, no—not upon that point," exclaimed Sir Aubrey. "It is indeed something that one would not like trumpetted forth to the public," he added in a musing tone.

"And then too," said I, promptly following up the advantage already gained, "you would be bringing down a legacy of dishonour—the reflection of a mother's shame—upon those dear children——"

"True again, Mary!" ejaculated Sir Aubrey. "There is force in your words:"—and now he bent his looks downward, and stood in the middle of the room reflecting profoundly.

"You see, Sir Aubrey Clavering," I continued, "that all things considered, it will be better to leave his life to this wretched nobleman, and compel him to abandon the country for ever. This will be an adequate vengeance; and by adopting such a course, there will be no revival of past scandals—the memory of her deceased ladyship will not be dragged in shame and dishonour before the world—the children will not have to blush for their parents as they grow up——"

"Enough, Mary—it shall be as you say," suddenly exclaimed Sir Aubrey Clavering; "and at least I shall have the satisfaction of overwhelming Lord Harlesdon with terrible reproaches. Do you choose to remain here and witness the result."

But ere I had time to reply to the question—and indeed before the question itself was finished—the door opened and Lord Harlesdon entered the room. This was the first time I had seen him since the night of the terrific tragedy; and I was struck with the alteration that had taken place in him. Nearly two months had elapsed since that memorable event; and during the interval he appeared older by as many years. All the hale vigour of a strong old age which had been wont to characterize him, appeared to be gone: he stooped considerably in his gait—his frame was terribly emaciated—his countenance was thin and haggard, even to corpse-like ghastliness—and the mourning garb which he wore (Oh! what a hideous mockery was that mourning dress in such a case!) seemed to hang upon him as if on the fleshless frame-work of a skeleton. There was a scowling sternness in his features as he entered the room; but in the quick glances which he threw first upon the Baronet and then upon myself, methought there was also the glitter of uneasiness.

"Sir Aubrey Clavering and Mary Price coming hither together," he began to observe, "is assuredly a circumstance I should little have expected. But perhaps," he continued with increasing irony, and also, I felt convinced, with increasing uneasiness, "you have made up past differences?"

"Silence, my lord!" interrupted Sir Aubrey Clavering: "this miserable attempt at banter on your part will not serve your purpose."

"And by what right," demanded the nobleman, now drawing himself up and assuming his natural hauteur, "do you intrude yourself within these walls? I shall not use the same language towards this young woman on account of her sex, and also because she has been in my service."

"My lord, your grand airs will not overawe me," said the baronet. "Things have transpired to place you in a position somewhat different from that security into which you had previously lulled yourself."

Paler grew the pallor, whiter the whiteness, ghastlier the ghastliness of Lord Harlesdon's countenance, as Sir Aubrey Clavering thus spoke. I longed to flee from the room: for the scene was indescribably painful, not merely in its own details, but likewise on account of the remembrance it so vividly conjured up. But I could not accomplish my wish; my physical powers would not obey my mental volition: there was a spell upon my limbs—they were rivetted to the spot; and there I stood, gazing upon the two, confronted as they were together, the murderer and the avenger!

"Yes, my lord," continued Sir Aubrey Clavering, "things have transpired which alter your position

materially. I need say no more than this—that every syllable which passed between yourself and Lady Davenport the night before last in Hyde Park, was overheard."

"Ah!" gasped Lord Harlesdon—and for a moment he staggered back; but almost immediately recovering himself, he said with an attempt at self-sufficient defiance, "And what if vile eaves-droppers and base listeners, in doing their dirty work, did overhear the discourse which passed between me and that lady—what does it all prove?"

"That from the very beginning you premeditated the murder of your wife," answered Sir Aubrey Clavering.

Lord Harlesdon was evidently struck by the truth of this observation,—yes, struck as though it were with the sharp blow of a hammer; and again did that horrible paleness seize upon him, and again did he stagger back as if about to fall down and expire.

"And you, base villain," he suddenly exclaimed, fury in his looks and rage in his tones, "dare constitute yourself the accuser! Suppose that——but I deny it——suppose, however, it be true that my wife's death was premeditated by me,—did she not deserve death? was there a vengeance within the reach and power of man too terrible to be wreaked against her who violated the sanctity of her vows and deceived me even before she became my wife? But who made her thus criminal? who gave her the first lessons in profligacy and deceit? You, sir—you, black-hearted villain that you are! It was you who did it all! If murder has been committed, it is you who are the real murderer: for your treachery, your crimes, were the main-spring of the catastrophe! What? through you have I endured unspeakable misery—and I was to put up tamely with it? No—by heaven! it was impossible!"

"Observe, Mary Price," exclaimed Sir Aubrey Clavering, livid with rage, "in his very words there is a confession of that black premeditation wherewith we charge him."

"Mary Price! do you appeal to her?" said the nobleman, flinging upon me the look of a basilisk. "Doubtless it was she who played the base part of listener the night before last?"

"No—it was another," ejaculated Sir Aubrey; "one who can be forthcoming as a witness at any moment."

"A witness?" echoed Lord Harlesdon, in mingled scorn, doubt, and uneasiness. "Do you mean to avail yourself of those gleanings so treacherously obtained——"

"Aye—to punish you!" rejoined the Baronet. "I came hither for the purpose of giving a murderer into custody; but certain considerations have led me to resolve upon a milder course. Lord Harlesdon, choose between the scaffold and exile. Promise to depart this very night—to leave your country for ever; or else resign yourself to the felon's doom. Now, my lord, which of these alternatives do you choose?"

The wretched nobleman was evidently confounded by the words thus imperiously thrown at him; and for nearly a minute he stood gazing in a species of dismay upon Sir Aubrey Clavering. Doubtless Lord Harlesdon, during that minute, revolved in his mind all the precise circumstances of his position, and whether he were really so completely divested of all the defences of his security as the Baronet had represented. If such were his reflections, as I presume them to have been, they assuredly terminated not in a manner satisfactory to himself; for his whole appearance gradually showed that he regarded his situation as that of a lost and fallen man.

"Sir Aubrey Clavering," he said in a low broken voice, "it is useless for us to bandy words farther. I will leave England."

"Within an hour?" said the Baronet, with the imperiousness of one who felt the satisfaction of being enabled to dictate terms to an enemy.

"Yes—within an hour," answered his lordship: and a still ghastlier expression passed slowly over his countenance.

"Never, never to return," rejoined Sir Aubrey, "under pain of at once being seized upon by the officers of justice!"

"Yes. The place to which I am going will be for ever—for ever!" said the wretched old man, with a voice and look which sent a chill pang through my heart—a pang which left a strange tightness there.

He then turned and slowly quitted the room.

"I have now nothing more to do within these walls," observed Sir Aubrey Clavering, after a pause of nearly a minute: and thus speaking, he also left the apartment.

But I did not instantaneously follow him. I sat down, sick at heart, and wishing that I had not been a spectatrix of the disagreeable scene which had just passed. The horrible look of Lord Harlesdon appeared to haunt me: and I thought within myself, "There was indeed no necessity to visit the extremest penalties upon that man's head. In the feelings of his own conscience is her ladyship's death avenged!"

Presently the door opened, and the hall-porter made his appearance.

"In the name of heaven, Mary, what is taking place?" he asked, evidently much troubled. "When his lordship left the room a few minutes back, he looked more like a ghost than a human being as he crossed the hall; and Sir Aubrey Clavering, as he went out, appeared to have upon his countenance a look that it did me harm to behold. You yourself, Mary, are pale and agitated. Tell me what has happened—do tell me."

"I cannot—I must not," was my hurried answer; "and you will do well to say nothing of all this to the other servants. One thing I may tell you, because you will doubtless hear of it within an hour—and that is, his lordship has made up his mind to leave England this very night."

The hall-porter gazed upon me with astonishment, and then exclaimed, "To-night! why, it is already twelve o'clock."

"So late!" I cried: for during the scenes which had been passing one after the other and with such a continuously sustained excitement, I had forgotten all about the lapse of time. I now remembered that Lady Davenport was waiting in the Park and that I had promised to return to her. "I must go at once," I said.

"What—alone?" asked the old man. "Had you not better remain here for the night? Although Jemima has doubtless been in bed long ago,

I daresay she will not feel angry at being disturbed by you."

"No—I cannot remain another instant," I said. "It is not likely that his lordship will take her and the children with him to-night. They will doubtless have to follow him, if he has them at all, poor little creatures! But I will come and see Jemima in the morning. And now good night."

With these words I hurried from the room, and passed out of the mansion, bending my way towards the Park with all possible speed. There I found Lady Davenport waiting in a dreadful state of excitement. In a few hurried words I told her that I had succeeded in persuading Sir Aubrey Clavering to adopt a more merciful and wiser course—that he had done so—and that Lord Harlesdon had agreed to leave London within the hour that was passing, and to lose no time in quitting England for ever. This intelligence seemed productive of infinite relief to Lady Davenport; and she thanked me with much apparent sincerity for coming back to her.

"But you, Mary, will faithfully keep this secret?" she said. "Remember how much depends on it!"—then, as if in the selfishness of her own nature she still considered it necessary, notwithstanding the manner I had previously repelled her offers, to follow up her injunction with the inducement of a bribe, she said, "You will not find me ungrateful. Let me know where you live, and I will send you a handsome present to-morrow."

I was about to give an indignant answer, when a sudden thought struck me; and I said, "Your ladyship, if you really be sincere in your wish to serve me, must accompany me ere we part to see where I live."

"Well, be it so," she replied, not with an over good grace—immediately adding, "I hope it is not very far?"

"As your ladyship lives in Portman Square," I rejoined, "it will not take you much out of your way to go round by Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury."

"It will make a matter of twenty minutes' difference," she said. "But never mind: I will do as you wish."

We then quitted the Park together, and fortunately procured a hackney-coach which was passing up Park Lane at the time. I told the driver whither to proceed; and now behold me ensconsed with that aristocratic lady inside the lumbering vehicle! No conversation passed between us until we entered Great Russell Street; and then the silence was broken by myself.

"Lady Davenport," I said, "I require nothing in the shape of a bribe as an inducement to keep secret all that concerns you. I would accept nothing from your hands. Here is where I live—and I thank you for accompanying me hither."

"Then what in heaven's name, young woman," she asked, in astonishment not altogether untinged with vexation, "did you bring me all out of my way like this?"

"Simply," I answered, "because I value my reputation, and did not choose to return alone at such a late hour. The little service you have done me in bringing me home, is all the bribe I require for keeping your ladyship's secret. Good night, my lady.

I do not think that Lady Davenport made any reply—for I had no doubt that she was deeply enraged at the little stratagem I had practised to obtain her convoy to my own door. But for her ladyship's displeasure I recked little indeed; and thanking the servant of the house for having sat up for me, I ascended to my own chamber, where through thorough weariness and exhaustion I soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE SUICIDE.

I MIGHT have slept on to a much later hour, had I not been awakened by a knocking at my door soon after eight o'clock in the morning. Rising to ascertain the cause of this unusual summons—for being myself habitually an early riser, I was not accustomed to be called by the servant of the house—I learnt "that Mrs. Simpson desired to see me immediately." Knowing full well who this Mrs. Simpson was, and wondering what could possibly have brought her hither at so early an hour, I bade the servant show her up at once; and during the minute or two that intervened ere the visitress made her appearance, I huddled on a few clothes.

The Gipsy Queen, dressed in a becoming middle-class apparel, and with her veil over her countenance, was introduced to my chamber; and the moment the servant had retired, she threw up her veil, revealing to me a countenance the expression of which at once indicated that something of importance had happened.

"Prepare yourself, Mary, to hear something dreadful," she began, with a deepening ominousness of look. "I thought I had better come myself at once to make you aware of it——But I see that you have already guessed it. Lord Harlesdon has committed suicide!"

Yes—I had indeed conjectured the terrible tidings which the Gipsy Queen had come to impart. I know not how it was, but the moment she began speaking in that tone of warning, bidding me prepare myself for something dreadful, the truth flashed to my mind; yet when her tongue spoke the fact a cry of horror escaped my lips. I was profoundly shocked, and for nearly a minute experienced such a strange sensation that my tongue was unable to give utterance to a single syllable of questioning.

"Yes," resumed the Gipsy Queen, after a long pause, "Lord Harlesdon is no more. It was with a dose of deadly poison that he put an end to his existence."

Then I remembered the horrible look of ghastliness which he had worn at the moment when he said to Sir Aubrey Clavering "that the place to which he was going would be for *ever*;" and I wondered that I was not struck at the time by the ominous significancy which I now remembered to have marked both his features and his accents. I asked the Gipsy Queen if she was acquainted with any particulars relative to his lordship's suicide: but she replied that she knew little beyond the bare facts she had already communicated to me. I was surprised that she should have learnt the circumstance at so early an hour; and I inquired by what means it had come to her knowledge?

"I was in that neigbourhood an hour back," she answered, "and learnt from some one whom I met the event which had taken place. It appears that his lordship left a few lines scribbled upon a piece of paper, and assigning for the deed which he contemplated some cause that will render a coroner's inquest a mere matter of ceremony. Beyond these few particulars I know nothing."

For some minutes I sat absorbed in profound and melancholy reflection. Was this the end of that proud and haughty nobleman whose wealth was so vast, whose estates were so immense, and whose establishments were on such a palatial scale? was this the end of one on whom the accident of birth had heaped such riches and such honours? To die as a despairing suicide at last! there was something awful and shocking in the idea; and I felt the blood curdle and stagnate in my veins as I reflected upon it. By degrees, as my thoughts began to expand from their concentration on that one terrific subject, and the incidents of the past night came crowding back to my mind, I recollected the strange conduct of Sir Aubrey Clavering and the Gipsy Queen towards each other at the door of Harlesdon House.

"There is one question which I am anxious to put to you," said I.

"I can anticipate it," observed Barbauld Azetha, in her wonted quiet manner, and without the slightest change of look. "You seek to know whether it was through me that Sir Aubrey Clavering became a listener in the Park to the conversation between ourselves and Lady Davenport last night? I can assure you, by all that the gipsy race deem sacred—by everything we consider solemn and holy—that I had not the slightest idea of his presence there until he so abruptly revealed himself."

"But it is evident that you know him well—intimately indeed, I may say—much better than I had any idea of."

"You must be aware that we are very far from strangers to each other," responded the Gipsy Queen, "when you recall to mind certain incidents which I had rather should have been buried in oblivion—I mean the part I played towards yourself in Derbyshire."

"But you appeared last night," I said, looking suspicious upon the subject, "to be on such terms as if you had a secret understanding together. He bade you depart in a manner which I certainly expected at the moment to see you resent: but so far from exhibiting anything more than a transient anger, you requested to speak aside to him—and then you conversed apart and in whispers for upwards of a minute."

"Miss Price," said the Gipsy Queen, drawing herself up somewhat haughtily, "I am not aware that it is my bounden duty to give you an account of my conduct."

"Most assuredly not," I at once replied, perceiving that this assumed dignity of her's on the present occasion was merely a refuge which she sought from the necessity of giving me any explanation of her mysterious proceeding in respect to Clavering. "No—assuredly not," I repeated coldly: "nor should I have alluded to the incidents at all, were it not that the suspicion was in my mind, amounting almost to a conviction, that it was through you Sir Aubrey Clavering appeared upon the scene in Hyde Park."

"The gipsy will no doubt lie, deceive, and tell falsehoods in the ordinary manner, to answer a purpose," responded Barbauld Azetha: "but to serve no earthly aim will the gipsy swear so solemnly as I did to you just now upon the point you have mentioned. Once more I declare, by everything I deem most holy, that I knew not of Sir Aubrey Clavering's presence there last night."

"I see that it is a topic upon which we had better not speak any more," said I, still in a somewhat reserved and cold manner: for I could not help thinking that there was even an evasion in that solemn assurance to which Barbauld Azetha had twice given utterance. For it might be true enough that she had not expected Sir Aubrey Clavering to be in Hyde Park at the time: but might she not have previously told him whom she was to meet there, and for what purpose? In short, could I possibly bring myself to believe it was a mere accident or coincidence which had led the Baronet thither at the very moment when a subject wherein he was so deeply interested was being discussed? And as there was evidently some secret understanding between Barbauld and Sir Aubrey, was it not perfectly natural to conclude that she had previously made him aware of the interview that was to take place in Hyde Park?

The Gipsy Queen saw that I was not altogether satisfied with the little incidents referred to: but it was equally evident that either her pride or some other reason prevented her from offering any farther explanation. She rose to take her departure; and extending her hand, said, "I hope that we shall separate in the same friendly spirit as we met."

"Assuredly," I replied, feeling my heart warm somewhat towards her: because as the reader is aware, I had conceived a liking for this singular woman. I therefore pressed her hand cordially. She then took her departure, drawing the veil down over her countenance; and I remained alone to reflect once more upon the tragic end of Lord Harlesdon. At length, anxious to escape as much as possible from the painful nature of these meditations, I began to bustle about to dress myself, and then to prepare my breakfast. By the time I had taken a cup of tea, a note was brought up by the servant of the house. It had been left by hand; and as I immediately recognized Jemima's writing, it was with no small degree of trepidation and suspense that I tore it open. Its contents ran as follow:—

"Dearest Mary,

"I write under the influence of feelings which you will better imagine than I can describe, when I tell you that his lordship has destroyed himself. Do come to me immediately, if you can. I understand from the hall-porter that you were here last night, and that you said you would call upon me in the morning.

"Your affectionate friend,

"JEMIMA WILKINSON."

I lost no time in obeying this summons, and proceeded at once to Grosvenor Square. The house presented externally the usual aspect of mourning where death is: all the blinds were drawn down—and I could not help thinking to myself, "Little perhaps did his lordship anticipate, when two months back these blinds were closed for Lady Harlesdon, that they would so soon be closed again

for himself!" Yet scarcely had I made this reflection, when the remembrance flashed to my mind that it was by poison he had killed himself. Then he must have had it handy in the house—and therefore he had probably all along made up his mind to die by his own hand, should accident bring his guilt fully to light and threaten him with the consequences. Unhappy man! had he, then, after committing murder, been compelled to keep his eyes fixed upon the prospect of suicide?

My summons at the front-door was answered by the hall-porter, who wore a mournful look; and as the kind-hearted old man took my hand, he said in a subdued voice, "Ah! Mary, when I saw his lordship looking so ghost-like last night as he crossed the hall, I had a sort of presentiment that something would happen. But go up-stairs to Jemima: she is anxiously waiting for you, and she will tell you all the particulars."

I accordingly ascended to the nursery, where I found Jemima with the three children. Master Alexander Adolphus, being above six years old, understood what death meant, and was crying because the intelligence had been gently broken to him "that his papa was dead." Albert Henry, being only just five, had but a vague and dim comprehension of what death meant: but still he cried, because his brother did—while dear little Isabella Clementina, now a little above three, was too young to have the slightest conception of what it meant by "her papa being dead"—but yet she was whining and crying because her brothers were unhappy. As for poor Jemima, she was quite wretched.

"You know, Mary," she said, after some few observations had been exchanged, "that his lordship was never a favourite of mine: but still for him to die by his own hand——and then these dear children to be left orphans, deprived of father and mother within the space of a couple of months of each other——there is something dreadful in all this!"

"Dreadful indeed, dear Jemima. But tell me——"

"First of all it is for you to tell me what you were doing here last night with Sir Aubrey Clavering——do tell me, Mary—I cannot understand it. The porter told me of it this morning, but quite privately; and he did not tell it to any other of the servants. He said that you had advised him not, and he meant to follow your counsel."

"I am glad of that," I observed: "it will save much useless conjecture, gossipping, and scandal. Fortunate was it that none of the footmen or pages happened to be in the hall last night, either when we came or took our departure. But tell me, Jemima, before I enter into any particulars—even if I can at all—the circumstances attending his lordship's death."

The reader is already aware that Jemima was a tractable, docile, and thoroughly good-tempered young woman,—generally letting others have their own way; and thus she did not persevere in questioning me at the present moment, but proceeded to give me the details I sought.

"It seems," she said, "that it was about midnight when his lordship ascended to his own chamber. His 'gentleman' was in attendance; but his lordship at once dismissed him, bidding him return in an hour as he meant to sit up and write some letters ere retiring to rest. The 'gentleman,' as he has since said, felt a misgiving arise in his mind at the time, that something was wrong; but he did not apprehend the terrible catastrophe that was to ensue. A little before the expiration of the hour he went back to his lordship's chamber; and not immediately perceiving his lordship, fancied that he had retired to rest without his assistance. The lamp was burning upon the table—the wax-lights upon the mantel. He approached the bed, and not finding his lordship there, imagined that he must have gone down stairs again: but as he turned to leave the room, he caught sight of his lordship sitting back in one of the large easy chairs. His first impression was that his lordship had fallen asleep in that chair: but the next instant observing the ghost-like pallor of his countenance, the chill of horror crept over him. He advanced—and a nearer survey showed him that his lordship was no more. An alarm was instantaneously given—physicians were sent for—but even before their arrival the sad truth had become only too apparent. A small phial, labelled *Poison*, was found close by the chair, having evidently dropped from his lordship's overhanging hand. Conceive the consternation that must have prevailed amongst those whom the 'gentleman's' furious ringing at the bells had brought to the room! A farther research showed them some writing on a sheet of paper that lay upon the table. I don't know the exact words; but I will tell you the sense of those lines which were traced by his lordship's hand during the last hour of his existence."

As this document was subsequently printed in the newspapers, I may as well present it at once to the reader, exactly as it was worded, and not according to the somewhat imperfect description which Jemima gave me of it at the time. Its contents ran thus:—

"The fatal accident which caused the premature death of my beloved wife, has preyed so upon my mind that I can endure it no longer. Life has become intolerable—I have nothing in the world worth living for, since all my happiness is poisoned by the bitter, bitter reflection that it was my hand which, though so unintentionally, sent my Clementina out of existence. There is madness in my brain—everything seems to be whirling round and round. I know not what I am doing. God forgive me!

"HARLESDON."

Though from Jemima's lips I only received the sense and not the exact wording of this document, yet did I glean sufficient at the time to confirm the information I had already received from the Gipsy Queen, and to prove that a coroner's inquest would be a mere matter of form. But I shuddered inwardly as I reflected that so far from Lord Harlesdon having experienced the feelings he described in that document, he had even gloried in the foul murder of his wife in the presence of myself and Sir Aubrey Clavering, on the preceding night, and within the hour which was the last one of his existence! Even when contemplating suicide—when looking death as it were in the face—Lord Harlesdon had dared to pen a falsehood to deceive the world. Doubtless his hope was that Sir Aubrey Clavering would not contradict the statement he thus traced in his last moments: for with regard to myself, he must have been well assured that I was

not so malicious as to do so. Though he had possessed hardihood enough to commit a murder, he did not wish to be branded as a murderer in the presence of the world, even though he himself should be no more;—and pitilessly vindictive as he had been towards his wife, he nevertheless took credit for a remorse of the most honourable and affectionate character (had it been real) in the eyes of all men. But though he had thus striven to conceal his turpitude beneath the guise of a falsehood, it was not for me to lift the veil therefrom, nor do aught to blacken the memory of the wretched suicide. Therefore, when Jemima had finished her narrative by telling me the sense of the document found upon the table, I saw at once that I could not give her any explanations relative to what had passed between myself, Sir Aubrey Clavering, and his lordship on the preceding night.

"It was not until this morning," added Jemima, "that I heard what had taken place: but when I awoke, the under-nursemaid came to the room to impart the dreadful intelligence. I hastened down stairs to ascertain if it were really true—for I could not believe it: and then it was that I got into conversation with the hall-porter, who told me that you and Sir Aubrey had been here last night. I must also inform you that from what the physician said, his lordship's death must have been pretty nearly instantaneous, as soon as he had swallowed the poison: for it was of the most virulent character. And now, Mary, I am waiting for such explanations as you may choose to give me respecting your visit to the house last night."

"Jemima, my good friend," I answered very seriously, "you must not press me upon this point. You know that I am incapable of telling a falsehood; and therefore I will not invent anything to satisfy your curiosity. But I will plainly and simply inform you at once that circumstances compel me to maintain an inviolable secrecy in respect to that business."

"I know that you would tell me if you could, dear Mary," rejoined Jemima, "and that you must have some very good reasons for not doing so. I will not therefore press you on the subject."

"But there is one thing that I must mention for my own sake," said I; "which is, that there is nothing changed in the feeling of aversion I experience towards Sir Aubrey Clavering, although the circumstances to which I have alluded threw us for a short time together last night. But when we separated again, it was, I assure you, with the hope on my part that I should never see him more."

Jemima and I continued to discourse upon the melancholy topic of the tragedy for nearly an hour: but I need hardly say that we did our best to soothe and comfort the little children. At the expiration of that interval the deceased Lord Harlesdon's sister, Lady Oldcastle—a dame well stricken in years, but very lively, active, and bustling—arrived at the mansion. Her residence was in the suburbs of London, and an express had been despatched to her early in the morning to communicate the circumstance of her brother's death. She came up into the nursery; and I at once saw by her manner that she was a lady of no very amiable disposition, —proud and arrogant as her late brother was, and looking down upon persons in servitude as something about as good as the dust beneath her feet. I therefore made haste to take my leave of Jemima and the dear little children, from whom I however found it somewhat difficult to get away: for they all besought me to stop, and little Bella clung to me most tenaciously. Lady Oldcastle inquired of Jemima who I was, "that the children made such a fuss with me:" and on being informed of my name, she said with a supercilious sneer, "Ah! the heroine of an adventure at Derby, eh?" I disengaged myself from the children's embrace and hastened away from the nursery, where I saw that my presence was disagreeable to her ladyship.

As I returned to my lodgings in Great Russell Street, I could not help thinking that Lady Oldcastle displayed very little grief at her brother's death; and I feared that if the poor orphan children were to be consigned to her keeping and in future live with her, they would not be made very happy. But I need not dwell at any greater length upon the few particulars which are requisite to dispose of this part of my narrative. An inquest was duly held upon Lord Harlesdon's body in the course of that day: but as the jury consisted almost entirely of the tradesmen of the household, there was no inclination to prolong the proceedings or penetrate beneath the surface of the tragic affair as it was presented to their view. The document found in Lord Harlesdon's room was considered quite sufficient to account for his self-destruction: and a verdict of "Temporary Insanity" was promptly returned. Cake and wine were then served up to the coroner and the jury in the dining-room where the inquest was held; and having comfortably refreshed themselves, they retired to their own homes, discussing in little knots of twos and threes the manifold virtues, excellences, and amiabilities of his deceased lordship. The misfortune however was that none of these admirable qualities on his part could be found out by his tradesmen during his life-time!

As I had supposed, the three children were taken into the care of Lady Oldcastle: but Jemima retained her place as principal nursemaid. I saw her for a short half-hour before she quitted Grosvenor Square to take up her abode at Oldcastle Lodge; and she promised to write to me from time to time and let me know all about the children, in whom I felt deeply interested.

The following quotation is from a biographical sketch of the late Lord Harlesdon which appeared in one of the daily newspapers:—

"His deceased lordship was a man of whom it may be said that his virtues were so numerous they utterly eclipsed any little failings which according to the common lot of humanity he may have possessed. But such failings, in contrast with the many admirable qualities which characterized this venerable nobleman, were mere spots on the sun's disc, visible only to a microscopic gaze. As a devoted husband, a fond father, a staunch friend, a benevolent landlord, and a kind master, Lord Harlesdon may assuredly be quoted as the type of perfection; while his innumerable charities, always distributed in secret, and never in ostentation, proved his illimitable sympathy for the poor and needy. Possessed of a powerful intellect and a vigorous mind, Lord Harlesdon was in every respect one of the brightest ornaments of a brilliant Aristocracy: he was a generous patron of literature and the fine arts, and loved to stretch forth a hand to the succour of struggling talent. In his own unostentatious way, he has often

penetrated into the obscure dwelling of genius and distress, and has left behind him the noblest evidences of his bounty. As a Christian, his lordship was of a piety of the purest and holiest kind—meek and inobstrusive, but holding faithfully and firmly to the tenets of that Established Church which is one of the pillars of our throne and the source of our blessed civilization. In politics this venerable nobleman was a staunch Tory, devoted to his King—the unflinching champion of our glorious constitution—and ever at his post in the higher branch of the Legislature to ratify his opinions with his votes. Conscientiously believing that it is entirely for the people's good that they should be placed as far as possible beyond the pale of political power, this honest and right-minded nobleman invariably raised his voice and recorded his suffrage against any proposition tending to let in the tide of a furious and turbulent democracy. One incident which so eminently redounds to his lordship's credit must not be omitted from a sketch which is intended to do honour to his memory, and express the wide-spread grief which amongst the upper classes is necessarily experienced at his loss. We allude to that troublous period when the Corn Law—a law which we regard as the acme of human wisdom—was first imposed in 1814, and at which period the riff-raff and rabble of society dared to rear their hydra-heads against the wisdom of our august legislature. At that time a mob, amounting to some twenty thousand wicked, seditious, and ill-disposed persons, being entirely of the working-class and therefore having no possible stake in the country, assembled near Derby, under the pretence of holding a meeting to petition Parliament. It was upon this occasion that Lord Harlesdon exhibited his firmness and decision: for being Lord Lieutenant of the county, he at once ordered out the military, headed them in person, proceeded to the spot, and with admirable promptitude commanded a charge to be made. This was done with such effect that the mob was speedily dispersed, some fifty or sixty of the seditious scoundrels being shot or sabred as they deserved; and two or three hundred (amongst whom there were many factious and ill-disposed women) were dangerously wounded. We might quote other instances of his lordship's firmness of mind and devotion to the blessed institutions of this happy and prosperous country; but we have said enough to commemorate all the virtues and do honour to all the excel-

lent qualities of this venerable and deeply regretted nobleman."

A Sunday newspaper of very large circulation, after noticing the death of his lordship, concluded its narrative of the suicide and inquest in the following terms:—

"Thus perished Lord Harlesdon—a wretched suicide dying by his own hand. Not one earthly virtue did this man possess—not one single good quality! A cruel husband, an indifferent father, a man incapable of friendship—oppressive, and therefore hated as a landlord—tyrannical, and therefore loathed by his servants as a master, the deceased has gone out of existence unregretted by a single soul, unless it be by the aristocratic order to which he belonged. To their gratitude he certainly had many claims; for his hatred to the people at large was inveterate as his opposition to the popular cause was stern, fierce, and uncompromising. It is one of the reddest pages of history in which his atrocious conduct at the meeting of an immense concourse of intelligent, enlightened, and honest working men at Derby, in 1814, is traced in letters of blood. We know the old motto, 'Speak nothing save what is good of the dead:' but unfortunately in the present case to say one good word in respect to Lord Harlesdon would be to stamp ourselves with the most flagrant falsehood."

The reader will perceive that the two passages above quoted stand in very strong contrast; and I must leave him to decide which of the two is nearer the truth. I must add, ere taking leave of this distressing subject, that the mural tablet which overlooks the family vault to which Lord Harlesdon's remains were consigned, represents the deceased as "a nobleman endowed with every virtue, and whose disposition, almost too good for that of man, very nearly approximated the condition of angels."

CHAPTER LXXIII.

MY SEVENTH PLACE.

I CASUALLY mentioned that the first floor of Mrs. Richards' house was tenanted by an old couple who habitually lived in the country, but who had come up to London on some business which detained them in town for a few months. Their name was Antrobus; and as eccentric an old couple they were as in the course of this narrative it will be my duty to introduce to the reader. The gentleman was about sixty-five—the lady seven or eight years younger. They were thoroughly good-tempered, and dotingly fond of each other. Mr. Antrobus had occasion to visit his solicitor nearly every day; but Mrs. Antrobus could not possibly think of letting him stir abroad without her. She therefore invariably accompanied him, even on his visits of business; and as I learnt, if he went to the Bank of England or to the office of his stockbrokers—no matter where—his wife was his constant companion. It was not that she was jealous of him,—although this even might have been the case, for age in respect to either party is no guarantee against jealousy: but such was *not* the feeling which inspired Mrs. Antrobus. The truth is, she was always afraid that he would not take proper care of himself in respect to his health, or that some accident would befall him. London, she said, was such a very wicked place, and so full of vehicles of all kinds. Whichever way you went, there was a thief ready to rob you some ruffian ready to knock you down, some constable ready to take you up, or some carriage, cart, or waggon ready to run over you. Then there were draughts in the hackney-coaches through broken or ill-fitting windows—such a heated atmosphere in the offices of business-men—such risks of sun-strokes in the middle of the summer-day—and such cold winds blowing round the corners of streets at nights, that it was quite impossible Mr. Antrobus could keep himself free from cold or other injuries to his health, unless she was ever at hand to take care of him. Therefore the good old soul, performing the part of guardian angel to her husband—though a somewhat fat and dowdy one—was his constant and inseparable companion.

It must not be thought that Mr. Antrobus objected to this tenacious clinging to him on the part of his wife. Very far from it; and it was as much through his wish as by her own desire, that she was so constantly with him. He could not have thought of going into the City and leave her, poor soul! to mope at home, fancying all kinds of things—that the hackney-coach had upset—or that possessing the phenomena of a pair of frisky horses, it had run away with him—or what was far more likely, that it had a drunken driver who would persist in taking him to Pentonville when he wanted to go into the City. Mr. Antrobus felt that such would be the dire imaginings of his beloved and devoted wife if he went abroad without her; and so they invariably went out together. For, as they very justly observed, if a vehicle *did* upset, or they *were* run over in crossing a street, or had the misfortune to fall in with a drunken driver who *would* persist in taking them five miles out of their way, they at all events would have the consolation of being together when any one of these dire mishaps should occur.

Infinite was the care which they took of each other, and which they were therefore individually compelled to take of themselves. If Mr. Antrobus, through getting a little dust in his throat, or having a crumb go "the wrong way" at meal-time, should happen to cough, poor dear Mrs. Antrobus would insist upon his going to bed early, putting his feet into hot water, taking some wine-whey or a basin of gruel, tying a flannel (perhaps a stocking) round his throat, having his bed warmed (although in the middle of summer), and sleeping with a mountain of extra blankets upon him. Then, on the following day, the anxiety of the worthy dame to have chicken-broth, jelly, arrow-root, and everything in readiness, showed all the sincerity of the importance which she attached to her husband's indisposition—an indisposition which after all existed but in her own imagination. On the other hand, if Mrs. Antrobus only took a slice of bread-and-butter less than usual at breakfast, her husband would immediately apprehend the worst. She was off her feed—she was ill—it should be taken in time—or else heaven only knew what might be the consequences! Then he would insist upon her nursing herself with as much care as she made him observe; and he would attend upon her with as much solicitude and affectionate ministration as could be shown by one of the other sex. But sometimes it happened that they were both unwell—or fancied that they were—or else persuaded each other that they were, at one and the same time; and then they were truly miserable,—

neither having the satisfaction of waiting upon the other, but both simultaneously confined to the bedroom and "coddling" themselves in a manner that would be ludicrous to think of, were they not such good-humoured, kind-hearted, and amiable old people.

A few words of personal description, and I may then pursue the thread of my narrative. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus were indeed admirably suited for each other, in aspect as well as in mind and temper. They were both short and stout, with large full-moon faces, small twinkling good-natured eyes, benevolent smiles playing about the lips, and fat double chins. In order to please each other, and mutually beguile any unpleasant perception of the ravages of time, they dressed gaily—not gaudily or outrageously—but in rather a juvenile fashion. Mr. Antrobus wore a wig of chesnut hair; and Mrs. Antrobus a flaxen front, which looked very natural indeed when set off by the spruce cap with its sprightly ribbons, or the ample bonnet with its waving feathers. The old gentleman wore a blue coat with brass buttons, a gay silk waistcoat, black pantaloons, and polished boots; and yet there was nothing of the mawkish affectation of the antiquated *beau* about him: he rather looked like a thorough English gentleman of the old school. Mrs. Antrobus was always what might be termed handsomely dressed, though some years behind the fashion of the day; and there was certainly nothing of the old coquette in her mien or manner. Generally speaking, when not having to nurse themselves for imaginary indispositions, and when not under the influence of the fear of being run over or run away with—upset or knocked down—taken ill or taken advantage of—Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus had the appearance of a comfortable old couple, with as few of the world's cares to trouble them as could possibly belong to the human condition—well-to-do in circumstances, and doatingly fond of each other.

From the long description which I have thus given of the lodgers on Mrs. Richards' first floor, as well as from the heading of the chapter itself, the reader is already aware that in the service of this old couple I was to find my seventh place. It was a fortnight after the suicide of Lord Harlesden, that from an intimation I received from Mrs. Richards, I spoke to Mrs. Antrobus. During the few weeks I had already lodged in the house, this lady had on several occasions spoken to me on the stairs—had once or twice called me into her sitting-room and insisted on my taking a glass of wine and a piece of cake,—and in short had showed me several little civilities, or rather kindnesses. Therefore I was already prepossessed in her favour; and when I heard that a circumstance had occurred which rendered it necessary for them to engage a servant-maid ere they left London, I cheerfully adopted Mrs. Richards' suggestion and applied for the place.

The circumstance to which I allude was this: Mr. Antrobus had a nephew who was a Captain in the Army in India. The Captain, who bore the same name as his uncle, was married and had two children: his wife and family had remained behind him in London, it being at first uncertain how long Captain Antrobus would remain in India. But letters had just arrived to the effect that he had obtained a high post about the person of the Governor-General, and that his wife must come out to him with as little delay as possible. It was not deemed advisable that the children, who were rather sickly and of tender age, should accompany their mother, and they were consequently to remain in England with Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. The lady had just taken her departure at the time of which I am writing; and it was to have the charge of the two little children that a nursemaid was required. Such was the situation now placed at my disposal; and I will describe the interview which took place with Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus on the occasion when I accepted it, as the reader will therefrom gain a farther insight into the characters and peculiarities of this eccentric but amiable old couple.

It was nine o'clock in the evening—the curtains were closed—the candles were lighted—the table was laid for supper. On one side sat the old gentleman in his dressing-gown and slippers,—not a dressing-gown of ordinary character nor slovenly worn, but of silken material, and of a gay, or rather cheerful pattern. Neither were the slippers old knocked-about things, trodden down at heel; but new morocco slippers of a purply colour, and worn as neatly as shoes. On the other side of the table sat Mrs. Antrobus, handsomely dressed, and looking as kind and benevolent as human countenance could possibly seem. The children, who were only consigned to their care that same afternoon, had been put to bed by Mrs. Richards, assisted by myself: for they were pretty little things—and being naturally fond of children, as well as pitying these in particular, for being deprived of their mother's care—I had been passing half-an-hour in the room to which they were consigned.

"Well, Mary Price," said Mrs. Antrobus, as I entered the parlour where the old couple were seated, "it would be an odd thing after all if you was to come and live with us—for I took a liking to you the very first day I saw you; and all that I have seen or heard since has made me like you still more. But are you sure you have shut the door behind you? for there is such a draught up the stairs—and poor dear Mr. Antrobus is so susceptible of cold——"

"Now, if there is a draught, my dear, in the room," interrupted her husband, looking with sudden care and uneasiness towards the middle window of the three, "it comes from that casement just behind you. Do pray sit farther round this way."

"I can assure you, my dear Mr. A., that there's not a breath of wind from that window at this moment."

"Really, my dear, I can feel it even where I am sitting. Do move a leetle—if it's ever such a leetle."

"Well, to oblige you, I will—you are so kind and considerate! But now the draught, if there is one—and I am sure there is, since you say it—*must* blow full in your face; and you will have a cold in your right eye to-morrow. Do pray move your chair a little also."

"Well, my dear soul, I will do so. There!"

The old couple accordingly shifted their chairs to please each other, although there was not a breath of wind stirring either inside or out of the house; for it was a close sultry evening in the month of July.

"Mrs. Richards dropped me a hint, my dear girl," continued Mrs. Antrobus, "that you would

like to come to us; and both Mr. A. and myself will be quite delighted. We don't want any references as to character, because we have already heard everything good concerning you——"

"I'm convinced I saw that candle flaring," exclaimed the old gentleman, now looking suddenly aghast at the particular light to which he alluded, and which I declare was burning as steadily as possible. "There's a draught from that farther window; and it takes you, my dear soul, on the left ear. You will have to put on an onion poultice to-night——"

"And you, my dear Mr. A., must really mix some goulard water for that right eye of your's, and bandage it up to-night. But you know, Mary," continued Mrs. Antrobus, now turning again to me, "that we purpose leaving the day after to-morrow, all Mr. A's business being settled in London. And I am so glad; for London is a dreadful place! I saw such an ill-looking man staring up at the window to-day and crying hearthstones. I am sure he was a thief——"

"Ah! and how near, my poor dear soul, you and I were run over to-day by that dreadful omnibus!" interjected her husband.

"Which puts me in mind," resumed Mrs. Antrobus, "that you had a terrible fright, my dear old man; and you must take something for your nerves. What say you to a leetle hot brandy-and-water, with a spoonful of the tincture in it? No—when I think of it, not with that threatened cold in your eye——you must go to bed early, take a nice bason of gruel——"

"But you also had your share of the fright, my dear," said the old gentleman; "and you had better do the same. I don't think we ought to touch that cold chicken and ham this evening," he added, looking with a sort of apprehension and misgiving at the dishes on the table.

"Oh! my dear Mr. A., I must see you eat a good supper after the fatigues of to-day. Besides, you made such a bad dinner. Really you must get another box of those dinner-pills."

"And you, my dear, must return to your old tonic—the camomile tea. Now mind, I shall make it for you myself to-morrow. But really I must protest against your eating any of that ham——"

"And I will follow your advice, my dear old man, on condition that you don't touch that salad."

"Well, well," rejoined Mr. Antrobus, not impatiently—quite otherwise—in truth, exceedingly uxorious; "I will do just as you say."

"You understand, then, Mary," said Mrs. Antrobus, "that we leave the day after to-morrow. And I had better tell you beforehand that such as you see us here, so shall we be at home—very plain people, living very quietly, seeing but little company—for dinner-parties don't agree with Mr. A., whose digestion is not particularly good——"

"And sitting up late quite kills you, my dear," observed the old gentleman. "In fact, Mary," he added, turning to me, "both the health of Mrs. A. and myself is very precarious—very precarious indeed. We are obliged to take great care of ourselves."

I could scarcely repress a smile: for I thought that I never had seen two more healthy-looking persons in all my life—I might even say with a healthiness of look approaching to joviality; and it struck me that if any people in the world might with impunity sup upon cold fowl, ham, and salad, such people were Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus.

"I must also tell you, Mary," resumed the lady, "that our house, though near Winchester, is quite retired and secluded—cheerful enough in the midst of nature's beauties, but with nothing of what London people call gaiety——"

"Stop, my love, stop, I implore you!" ejaculated Mr. Antrobus. "That other candle has flared, I positively affirm! Good heaven, this room is full of draughts! you will catch your death with cold, my poor dear creature—and then what will become of me? There must be a crevice in the window-frame——"

"Or perhaps the draught comes through the key-hole," suggested Mrs. Antrobus, her look having grown as dismayed as that of her husband. "Positively you must put your feet into hot water to-night, with a tea-spoonful of mustard to give it warmth."

"Well, my dear soul," replied her husband, "I will follow your advice: but really I think you had better take your breakfast in bed to-morrow. You don't look well——there's a certain paleness which isn't right. I am really alarmed. Perhaps it was the heat in the City when in the sun——"

"Or else the cold in the shade," suggested the lady: but if it were to account for her own looks, there certainly was nothing to account for, as she appeared to be in the most vigorous health.

"Our solicitor's office struck me as being quite damp to-day," observed the old gentleman.

"Then I am sure you had better take a treacle-posset to-night, instead of the gruel," said the lady; "or you will be very, very ill to-morrow. However, we will arrange all that presently. And now, Mary, as I was telling you, our house in the country may seem dull and lonesome to one who is accustomed to London——"

"I can assure you, ma'am," was my answer, "that I am far less accustomed to London than I am to the country, and that I infinitely prefer the latter."

"I am rejoiced to hear you say so," observed Mrs. Antrobus; "and I think you are wise—for the country is much healthier in every way. There is no stone pavement to attract the sun—no long streets for the wind to go rushing through——"

"And then take you with a nipping chill as it comes round a corner," added Mr. Antrobus. "But I am very much mistaken if I did not see the curtain of that window shake; and if there's a draught there as well as from the other windows, through the keyhole, and down the chimney, I don't know what will become of us!"

In this manner did Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus go on talking for a considerable time, suggesting to each other all kinds of things that they were to take that night on going to bed to avert threatening colds, rheumatisms, headaches, and so forth: but during the intervals of their discourse they both alike gave me assurances of the kindest treatment as well as the most liberal wages. In short, we came to an agreement that very evening. The next day I wrote to all to whom it was necessary to make known my future address, not forgetting Jemima, whom I had not time to go and see at Lady Oldcastle's, in consequence of leaving London so speedily.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when the stage-coach in which we journeyed from London, drew near the City of Winchester. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, myself and the two children, occupied the interior of the vehicle; and though it was a broiling day in the middle of summer, the old gentleman had on his great coat and his wife a fur round her neck. They had mutually insisted upon each other being thus muffled up to guard against the draughts which they declared were always to be encountered in travelling by stage-coaches. Then, as the perspiration poured down their ample countenances, they begged each other to take care of themselves as they thought there was a chill in the air; and they charged me to keep the children well wrapped up. They even endeavoured to persuade me of the folly of throwing off my shawl; but I must do them the justice to say that although they carried their own precautions to such ludicrous extremes, they did not despotically compel me to follow their example. And when I represented to them that the fresh air was necessary to the children, and that there was no need to muffle them up, they suffered me to have my own way,—observing that after all I was possibly right, there being a great difference between young people and old.

When within about two miles of Winchester, the coach stopped at a wayside cottage, standing all alone, and having a very picturesque appearance. My first impression was that this must be our place of destination: but a second glance convinced me that I was mistaken;—for though a genteel little residence, it was evidently too small for persons of comfortable means such as those of my new master and mistress. That second glance likewise showed me a young female of remarkable beauty, who came forth from the portico formed of wreathing jessamine and honeysuckle. The powerful sunlight seemed to float around her like a glory, displaying the singular beauty of her rich auburn hair now shining with a golden light; and also setting forth the exceeding delicacy of her smooth and finely grained complexion, so pale and so transparent. Her figure at first struck me as being of sylph-like slenderness: but as she drew nearer, I observed that it was thin with an air of wasting—rather with the delicacy that interested, than with the emaciation that shocked. I observed also that the pallor of her countenance was mingled with a sedate pensiveness, which did not belong to her age: for she could not have been more than eighteen or nineteen. At the first glance it struck me that her form had a bending and statue-like grace: but the second look showed me that it was rather with a drooping and languid air, which indeed appeared to characterize her altogether. Yet it was impossible to gaze even for a few moments upon her singular and spirit-like beauty, without being struck by the conviction that some heart-tale was connected with that young creature, and that her experiences of life had not been as happy as they ought. In a word, I conceived a quick and lively interest in this charming unknown who issued from the cottage the moment the coach stopped, and hastily threading the gravel walk which intersected the little garden of about twenty yards deep, approached the wicket opening into the road. All in a moment I saw her eyes of beautiful blue—they were large, soft, and full of a melting sadness—rest for an instant upon the persons inside the vehicle: and then she gave a slight start as if a quiver had run through her form, while at the same instant the deepest blush suddenly mantled in carnation glow upon the countenance that was a moment before so pale, so colourless. Instinctively I looked around towards Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus; and I was struck by observing the look of mingled reserve and compassion—coldness strangely blended with sympathy—which they exchanged, and which was evidently significant of some effect produced upon their minds by the apparition of that fair young creature.

"One shilling to pay!" shouted the guard of the coach leaning down from the seat behind, and presenting a brown paper parcel to the young female, who at once drew forth her purse and produced the coin named. But I observed that she was cruelly agitated—that her white taper fingers trembled so that they could scarcely perform their task—that the colour came and went rapidly upon her countenance—and that two tears glistened on the long lashes which beautifully fringed her eyelids. But transient was the opportunity which I had for making these observations, inasmuch as having received her parcel she turned abruptly away to re-enter the cottage, while the coach whirled on towards the cathedral city.

The fair young creature was no longer in sight—she had disappeared like a vision, leaving however a deep impression upon my heart. It was not the sentiment of mere idle curiosity: it was a tender and compassionate interest on behalf of one so beautiful, so young, and evidently so much acquainted with care. I looked towards Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus: they were grave, solemn, and serious. Even the very benevolence which naturally belonged to their features, seemed absorbed and lost for the moment in the gloom of that gravity. For a gloom it assuredly was,—but the gloom likewise which made me aware that though they observed the feeling of curiosity which had sprung up within me, they did not intend to gratify it. And I do not hesitate to say that a livelier curiosity I had not often experienced. For that this young female of the cottage was known to Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, and that they were equally well known to her, had been evident enough: but that they, instead of choosing to recognize her, had averted their looks in cold reserve, and then exchanged with each other almost simultaneous glances of compassion, was also apparent. That she too had felt she was thus ignored by them—thus rejected from the acknowledgment of acquaintanceship—was a fact not the less patent. What could all this mean? Who was she—that fair being of the cottage? A thought stole into my mind—but only for an instant: I dared not harbour it,—for it seemed so terrible—indeed I may say so shocking—to impute guilt to a being whose spirit-beauty appeared to shine through her with an angelic effect.

Such were the reflections which swept through my mind as the stage-coach rolled away from the spot where my feelings had been so suddenly and so vividly excited. But the train of my meditations was cut short in a few moments by another halt of the equipage; and this time it was in front of a genteel country residence—a moderate-sized, well-built house, beautifully situated in the midst of verdure and flowers, and just the very sort of place I

had already pictured in my mind as the dwelling of my new master and mistress. Two respectable-looking, neatly-dressed female servants, each about thirty years of age, came forth to welcome the travellers home; and an old gardener, with an immense straw-hat, likewise stepped forward with a smile upon his face—a smile which was full of the kindliness of an old servant long in the employ of those whose return filled his heart with joy. The trunks were soon handed down by the guard to the old gardener—we all alighted from the interior of the vehicle, the female servants helping out the children, of whose coming they had previously been made acquainted by letter—the coachman and guard were remunerated with liberality by Mr. Antrobus—and the equipage dashed onward in its way to Winchester.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE CONJURORS.

It would be impossible to conceive a more perfect picture of neatness than the dwelling of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. Well furnished, without any ostentatious display, all the apartments were kept in the best order: there was not a speck of dust to be seen—not a chair out of its place—but all the arrangements betokening scrupulous care and nicety. The reader may rest assured that the rooms were all guaranteed against draughts, the windows being made to fasten with the utmost exactitude, and the doors all having list nailed round them. The two female-servants whom I have mentioned above, were the housemaid and parlour-maid: they were very respectable-looking women, about thirty years of age—quiet, steady, and much attached to their master and mistress. The cook was a middle-aged, stout, good-tempered woman, and had been for many years in her present place. No man-servant was kept; but the old gardener lived upon the premises, and had likewise been a considerable time in the service of Mr. Antrobus. I received a kind welcome from my fellow-servants in my new place, and had not been there many hours ere I saw enough to convince me that I should be very happy and comfortable with this family.

The two children that I had to take care of, were a boy and girl of five and three years old respectively. I have already said that they were somewhat sickly and required a great deal of attention. I was first of all fearful that Mrs. Antrobus would interfere with me a great deal in the management of them, carrying her own eccentricities into the nursery, and bestowing upon the little ones a share of that anxiety which she constantly experienced in respect to her husband's health. But this was not the case: the good lady seemed to put the utmost confidence in me, and allowed me to have entirely my own way. The day after our arrival Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus went into Winchester and returned in a few hours' time with an immense quantity of toys for the children; so that the nursery was soon in the most admirable confusion therewith. To my mind however there is no sight more beautiful than that of little children amusing themselves with the toys newly brought home; and as I sat and gazed upon them, I could not help thinking that whi all human beings have their playthings, those of the child are objects of the most innocent and unalloyed delight while those of the man are too often fraught with terrible mischief or else produce the most fearful delusions. The drums and rattles of the former create a noise which may sometimes give the headache: but the drums of man when beating amidst the rage of strife, and the thundering rattle of the artillery, accompany the scenes where thousands of lives are destroyed and produce the bitterest heart-ache. Sad and mournful reflection! that the child on whose chubby countenance play the most innocent smiles, and whose little heart beats with such unsophisticated feelings, should grow up to become the man on whose features selfishness and worldliness trace deep lines and leave their sinister impress, while the secret thorns of envy, avarice, jealousy, and ambition rankle in his heart. With the child the sweatmeats and delicacies bestowed upon it have nothing bitter in their taste, and are indeed *all* sweet: but with the man too often do inward cares, anxieties, and the rankling of dark passions mingle their poison in his sweetest cup. With the child, ignorance of the world is a source of happiness and good: but with the man, his superior knowledge is full often a source of misery and evil. The inexperience of the child sustains the buoyancy of its spirits and nurtures the best feelings of its disposition: but with the man does knowledge prove too little for his mind and too much for his heart.

During the first week that I was in my new place, I felt my spirits, which had been depressed during all the latter part of my residence in London, speedily recovering their wonted healthful tone—an improvement to which certain letters that I received no doubt essentially contributed. From Eustace Quentin came one couched in more tender and affectionate terms, if possible, than ever. He said that he was glad I had obtained change of scene after the horrible occurrences in connexion with the Harlesdons, which, as he had learnt from my letters, had affected me greatly; but he still regretted that I persisted in pursuing my humble and solitary course of life, instead of at once becoming his wife and thus ensuring myself a constant, loving, and faithful companion. From my brother William I received a letter stating that he had been to see Sarah in her place at Talbot Abbey, that she appeared quite happy and comfortable, and that she was growing quite a fine girl. Little Jane was also in good health, and was most kindly treated by Mr. Collins's housekeeper. A letter from my good friends the Percivals gave me most satisfactory accounts of their prosperity; and another from Mrs. Calder, written from Italy, and sent by way of Ashford, informed me that Mr. Edward's health was still considerably improving. Thus, altogether, my correspondence at the time of which I am writing was well calculated to cheer my mind.

It was at the expiration of the first week in my new place, that Mrs. Antrobus came up into the nursery after breakfast one morning, and said, "Mary, I mean to give you and the two maids" (alluding to the parlour-maid and housemaid) "a great treat to-night. In fact, to tell you the truth, dear Mr. A. and I are going to regale ourselves in a similar manner: for it is impossible to resist the attractions of this truly wonderful performance."

Thus speaking, the good-natured old lady unfolded an immense long bill, printed like a play-bill, and setting forth how those celebrated and world-renowned Polish conjurors, Count Lievebewitz and Chevalier Pichantoss, had taken the Winchester Theatre for three nights (positively for three nights only, they being under a bond to the amount of 100,000*l.* to appear at Drury Lane Theatre on the fourth night thence, and that therefore the nobility and gentry, as well as the citizens and working-classes of Winchester and its environs, would never have another opportunity beyond these three nights of beholding the two celebrated conjurors). The bill then proceeded to set forth a detailed programme of the performance,—showing how Count Lievebewitz would ride a donkey, which he had specially trained for the purpose, up a perpendicular ladder—how the Chevalier Pichantoss would ascend without any visible means from the stage to the ceiling, and dance a hornpipe round the hoop of the central lustre, without breaking the same or his own neck—how the two conjurors together, embraced in each other's arms, would perform six consecutive summersets in mid-air, without touching the stage the whole time, and without having any rope to sustain them—how they would produce their magic mirror in which any lady or gentleman present should see reflected the image of a future husband or wife, respectively, as the case might be—how Count Lievebewitz would pass his head through any lady's wedding-ring and grin through it as through a horse-collar; how the Chevalier Pichantoss would dance a fandango in a sack, while his comrade the Count would produce from a bellows and a kitchen-poker more exquisite strains of music than ever were drawn from the finest violin; and how, after an infinite variety of other achievements far too numerous to mention and too wonderful to be believed unless witnessed, the performance would conclude by the Count rolling himself up into a ball no bigger than a good-sized melon, and by the Chevalier getting bodily and entirely into a quart-pot.

I must say that I laughed very heartily at the miracles set forth in this programme, which had a foot-note appended, explaining how these Polish worthies, having fought for the independence of their country, were compelled to seek refuge on the hospitable shores of Britain—and how their immense fortunes had been confiscated, the Count losing in one fell swoop an estate of six thousand acres with a revenue of four hundred thousand pounds a-year, and the Chevalier suffering to very nearly a like extent, so that they had been compelled to turn their talents to the best possible advantage in a foreign clime.

Talents indeed! methought if they could only perform one tithe, or one-hundredth part, of what was set forth in this programme, they must be the two most extraordinary men in existence: but it certainly struck me as very odd that two noblemen of such enormous wealth as they appeared to have possessed, could ever have been characterized by such talents at all. Indeed, I ventured to express my belief to Mrs. Antrobus that there must be some trick at the bottom of it all.

"Well, my dear Mary," she said, "I do not of course believe that everything announced in this prospectus will be performed; but that they are very wonderful conjurors, and that their tricks will be productive of great amusement, there can be no doubt. All Winchester is talking of them, and the theatre to-night will no doubt be crowded to excess. I have sent the gardener across to secure a box; and as I said just now, you and the two maids shall go with dear Mr. A. and myself. Cook has volunteered to take care of the children."

"Really, ma'am," I answered, "while thanking you for your kindness, I would rather remain at home and take care of the children myself. I have no fancy for such exhibitions."

"I shall take no refusal, Mary," said the kind-hearted lady, with the best possible intention. "There is sure to be some excellent performance, although the programme may be exaggerated: but we know that foreign conjurors do perform very singular things. Of course the story of their estates and the titles they have given themselves, are most likely nothing but flourishes: but the whole is put forth with so much good-humour that it is impossible not to be anxious to befriend the two poor fellows. So we will all go, Mary: that is decided. A fly is ordered to be here at six o'clock; and Mr. A. has promised to wrap himself up in his over-coat and put a comforter round his neck, so that he shan't catch cold."

Here I should observe that the weather was most insufferably hot—that there was not a breath of air stirring—and that for the last few days the evenings had been so close and sultry that a storm had been expected.

"Cook will have hot water ready, so that dear Mr. A. can have a foot-bath when he comes home," continued Mrs. Antrobus; "and a good bason of gruel will make him sleep soundly. He insists that I shall take the greatest care of myself; and therefore you see we have been settling everything in our own minds."

Having talked in this strain for some little time longer, Mrs. Antrobus descended from the nursery; and I proceeded to dress the children to take them out for a walk. Without any premeditated design I took them through the fields in the direction of that pretty little cottage where I had seen the sweet young creature whose appearance had so much interested me, and concerning whom there seemed to be some mystery which I had not yet fathomed. Frequently, during the week which had elapsed since I first saw her, had her image presented itself to my mind; and that Madonna-like countenance, so soft and touching in its pensive sadness, had appeared to rise up before me. Nevertheless, I had asked of my fellow-servants no question concerning her; because I had felt assured that if Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus had thought it right to be explanatory relative to whatsoever circumstances might concern her, they would have done so instead of maintaining a reserve which had naturally led me to infer that it was a tale which I had better not inquire into. I had not therefore sought to gratify my curiosity in that quarter; and it was with no object of the kind that I now bent my steps with the children in the direction of the picturesque cottage. Indeed I was thinking at the time of the programme of the Polish conjurors; and it was while my thoughts were thus settled upon this ludicrously exaggerated assemblage of marvels, that I insensibly followed the path leading through the fields towards that cottage-dwelling. I may also

observe that it was the only walk where the shade of trees could be obtained; and thus it was natural enough that I should pursue that course on a forenoon belonging to the hottest of all the hot days of that season.

We had walked about half-a-mile, and I was listening to the interesting prattle of the eldest boy to his little sister, when all of a sudden I observed a female approaching. She was followed by a neatly dressed servant-girl of sixteen or seventeen, and who carried a child of about two years old in her arms. I know not how it was, but even while they were yet at a distance I felt the intuitive feeling rise up within me, that this female, followed by the servant-maid with the child, was the object of my interest and curiosity. Nor was I mistaken: for as she drew nearer I recognised the radiant glory of her sunny hair showering in ringlets down upon her bosom from under the front of her bonnet, and flowing over her shoulders from beneath the curtain thereof. She was dressed in a plain and simple manner, but with exquisite neatness; and her whole appearance was a blending of the softest, saddest beauty with a natural elegance and grace. Thus, though unobtrusive, and indeed bashful and retiring in her looks, even as if with the consciousness that she *ought* to be so, she was notwithstanding a charming and fascinating creature whom it was impossible to view otherwise than with the deepest sympathy and most compassionating interest. The child was sitting up in the girl's arms, and its little hands were playing with the ribands in her bonnet. Such sweet pretty little hands! such fat chubby arms! and the child's face, too, set off with flaxen hair, had the appearance of a rosy-cheeked wax-doll —except that it was full of life and innocent smiles, a joyous light dancing in its large blue eyes.

At the first glance cast upon this group—the interesting young lady, the nursery-girl, and the child—methought I half read a clue to the mystery which had hitherto enveloped that fair creature, and relative to which Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus had maintained so deep a reserve. Was it possible that this beautiful innocent-looking young female had, unwedded, become entitled to a mother's name? Ah! by the pensive face on which the blush of shame seemed slowly to suffuse itself as her eyes met mine, I feared that my conjecture was the true one! But Oh! if she had erred, she must have been most foully deceived—most treacherously betrayed; for there was assuredly nothing evil in her looks—nothing to indicate the young woman of strong passion—and still less anything to mark the wilful sinner. On the contrary it appeared to me that there was positively a halo of virtue and an air of conscious purity about that young woman, even despite her suspicious look when at the coach door, and despite also that blush of seeming shame which now mantled upon her cheeks as her eyes encountered mine.

I know not whether I gazed so long upon her and so intently, as to be guilty of rudeness; but I certainly did fix my regards more earnestly than perhaps I ought upon that interesting being. Yet there must have been an unmistakable expression of sympathy and commiseration in my countenance at the time; for in no other way could I have thus intently surveyed her. And that there was too, I subsequently felt certain as I walked onward after passing her by; for I then reflected that even as the blush rose to her cheeks her eyes assumed a grateful expression—soft and indefinably plaintive, deep, and touching—as if she read my own feelings towards her and thanked me for them. But it was no wonder that such feelings of interest and sympathy should have filled my heart—for she was a being well calculated to excite them. I walked on in profound abstraction, almost regretting that I had not spoken to her, even if it were only a single word. But then, what right had I to do so? We were utter strangers; and moreover she was my superior in social position, even if she were not altogether a lady—and such, in the general acceptance of the term, she certainly looked.

I did not walk very much farther, as the children were getting tired; but we sat down for a little in the fields under the shade of the trees. Presently I beheld the object of my curiosity with the servant-girl and child retracing their way, evidently towards the cottage. I rose up, impelled by the sudden determination to speak to her; but as she drew nearer, the thought suddenly flashed to my mind that as my master and mistress had pointedly avoided any communication with her when she saw them in the coach, it would be improper for me to introduce myself. I accordingly kept silent. As she passed, she in her turn looked earnestly at me. Methought there was something in her gaze which told me that she longed as much as I did to exchange a few words, and that she even understood wherefore I abstained from making the first overture. Nay, more —I even fancied that her lips parted for an instant as if about to give utterance to the words that wavered on them, but that she also suddenly checked herself and with a painful effort held her peace. She even quickened her footsteps, passed me by, and did not once turn her head until she reached the gate at the extremity of the field. Then she looked round for a moment—but only for a moment—and proceeding on her way, closely followed by the servant-maid and child, was quickly out of sight. I returned home with my little charges, thinking the whole time of the young lady of the cottage.

In the evening the fly arrived at the appointed hour. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, well muffled up, entered it, followed by the two maids and myself. There was not a breath of air stirring: the heat was oppressively sickening—and yet the worthy old couple would insist upon having all the windows of the vehicle closed. In their natural good-humour they anticipated great pleasure from the evening's entertainment: but during the ride to Winchester there were certain little drawbacks to their comfort. Mr. Antrobus discovered that there was a draught from one of the windows; and he seriously apprehended that his beloved wife would be laid up next day, unless she took a foot-bath on returning home, a treacle-posset, and lay in bed to breakfast the next morning. Then Mrs. Antrobus found out that the flooring of the chaise gaped with sundry small crevices; and she was lamentably afraid lest her dear old soul of a husband should catch the rheumatism, which might lead to gout, and gout might be accompanied by dropsy, and a whole train of evils was to follow, unless he promised to adopt precautions similar to those which he had recommended to herself. But this was not all: the horse happened to shy a little at something in the road

—whereupon Mrs. Antrobus was convinced that the driver must be tipsy; and her husband immediately recollected that he had noticed a very vacant stare on the part of the man as he opened the door to let them into the vehicle. I certainly *had* observed that the driver did look rather hard at my master and mistress at the time: but it was scarcely astonishing, seeing how they were muffled up, the former in a great coat and comforter, and the latter with her furs—the weather being, as already described, of such oppressive sultriness.

However, we reached Winchester without any accident, although both Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus were more than once thrown into dire dismay lest the vehicle should upset or the horse run off—which latter casualty was very far from probable, inasmuch as the poor animal had really but three legs to make use of, and had the trouble of dragging the other as a dead weight. Alighting at the entrance to the Theatre, we found that there was a perfect concourse of vehicles of every description, from the private carriage and its well caparisoned pair down to the minutest pony-chaise. The people were pouring in; and it was evident enough, as Mrs. Antrobus had assured me, that all Winchester was in a tremendous state of excitement at the marvellous programme issued by the Polish conjurors. We were duly conducted to the box that had been secured for our accommodation; and it was not till they were safely ensconced therein, and had assured themselves against the existence of draughts, that my master and mistress would consent to unmuffle themselves from their hot garments. They occupied the front seat in the box, the two maids and myself sitting behind. As we had expected, the theatre was crowded from pit to roof; and before the hour arrived when the performance was to commence, every place was occupied. As we subsequently learnt, great numbers of persons were turned away from the doors, there being no room

for them. Th wealthiest families of the city and neighbourhood were present, and the printed programmes were in immense request. The scene was most hilarious; for everywhere the reading of the bills excited peals of laughter. At the same time there was a general feeling of wonder and eager curiosity as to the extent to which the promises of the conjurors would be performed: for the stage (the curtain being already raised) showed preparations which to a certain extent seemed to justify the announcements of the programme. For instance, there was a ladder fixed upright, the summit of which was lost amidst the canvass clouds overhanging the stage; and to the foot of this ladder a donkey was attached by a halter. Heaven knows, the poor animal was light and airy enough to climb wheresoever a donkey could possibly go: for it was the leanest and most wretched starveling of its species I ever beheld in all my life. There was also a large mirror resting against a table in the middle of the stage; and upon this table stood a pewter quart-pot, into which the Chevalier Pichantoss was to condense himself. There were divers other articles scattered about, all bearing reference to the details of the programme, so that the expectations of the audience were evidently raised to the highest degree.

An orchestra had been duly provided, consisting of a harp which gave forth the gloomiest tones—a very wheezy violin—a flute that was evidently cracked—a flageolet that did nothing but scream—and a trombone so hoarse that it resembled a boatswain who had been roaring for a week throughout a succession of terrific gales. Neither did the players of these instruments seem to be in the best possible concord as to the particular symphony which was to cheer the audience ere the commencement of the entertainments: for while one of the orchestra struck up "God save the King," another began "Rule Britannia," and a third the "Old Hundreth." However, the spectators were all in the best possible humour: for they had not come to listen to the music, but to behold the wondrous necromantic feats announced in the programme.

The overture being ended, the tinkling of a bell was heard, and silence prevailed throughout the theatre: for that was regarded as a signal that the illustrious conjurors were about to come forward. And so they did,—one from the right hand side of the stage, the other from the left;—and joining in the middle, they made their bow to the audience. Immense was the applause wherewith they were received: but heavens! what a strange idea struck me at the moment. I passed my hand over my eyes, thinking that my sight was deceiving me and that I was labouring under a mistake. Then I looked again—and the idea grew more firmly rivetted in my mind. I strained my eyes with a painful eagerness. Yes—there was no mistake: it was indeed they—Mr. Tomlinson and my brother Robert!

I sank back in the corner of the box, almost stupified: for it instantaneously struck me that some trick was intended, as I knew perfectly well that however great a conjuror Mr. Tomlinson might be, Robert was none at all,—unless indeed he had qualified himself in that line since I last saw him, which I did not think likely. The maids, who sat upon the same bench with myself, did not observe the state of feeling into which this recognition of Count Lievebewitz and the Chevalier Pichantoss threw me: for they were altogether intent upon feasting their eyes with the presence of those two wondrous men who were to perform impossibilities.

As a matter of course I did my best to regain my presence of mind: for I did not wish to betray what I felt and incur the chance of having disagreeable questions put to me. But the reader may rest assured that it was with no pleasurable state of feeling that I awaited the *finale* of this new and strange adventure in which Mr. Tomlinson and my brother had embarked. All that was ludicrous in their programme, now lost its salient influence upon me, and lay like a weight of lead upon my mind. My sensations were those of the most painful suspense and poignant curiosity.

Mr. Tomlinson, with a most wonderful effrontery, began to address the audience so soon as the applause had ceased. Affecting the broken English and foreign accent which might be supposed to belong to the character he was personating, he commenced, with a majestic wave of his arm, by stating that however extraordinary the announcements made in the programme might appear, they would nevertheless be fulfilled to the very letter. He went on to declare that not only should the noble donkey, then and there present, ascend the ladder perpendicularly fastened, but that he (Count Lievebewitz) would ride on the aforesaid sagacious animal's back during the performance of the feat. Pointing to my delectable brother, he proceeded with consummate coolness to declare that he (Chevalier Pichantoss) although so young, had distinguished himself in nineteen battles between the Russian and Polish armies—that he had been wounded seventy-six times—and carried the scars of fifty-three of the said wounds about his body. As for himself (Lievebewitz) he did not like to boast of his own exploits, but he must be permitted to tell the truth. One portion of this truth was that he had been left for dead eleven times on the glorious battle-field; and another portion was that he had only been recalled to life again on each occasion in the most miraculous manner. He then fell suddenly into the dismals; and pointing to the starveling ass, pathetically lamented, with his hand upon his breast, the dire necessity which compelled him who had bestridden war-steeds to mount the back of that animal. He craved the sympathy of the audience—he appealed to the generosity of the great British public to bestow its good feeling upon himself and comrade in exile; and he wound up this highly edifying speech by declaring that when Poland should be free and he and his beloved companion were restored to their estates which had been so unjustly confiscated, they would send over a couple of millions sterling to be distributed amongst the poor people of England.

This harangue, which the educated portion of the audience naturally regarded as a burlesque prologue to the entertainments, but which the more ignorant and credulous received as gospel, was saluted with another round of applause, Count Lievebewitz and Chevalier Pichantoss—who, by the bye, were both exceedingly well dressed—bowing and scraping the whole time. When silence was restored, the first-named gentleman waved his arm as indicative that he was about to speak again; and he proceeded to say that he and his gallant and

patriotic comrade were so overpowered by the generous reception they had experienced, that they must retire for a few minutes to compose their feelings. Here both Mr. Tomlinson and my brother applied white handkerchiefs to their eyes in a truly theatrical manner; while "Hooray!" and "Brayvo!" resounded from the gallery. Mr. Tomlinson—or, I beg his pardon, Count Lievebewitz—once more extending his arm, promised to return in a few minutes to commence the intellectual, artistic, and wondrous performance on the donkey; and then clapping his pocket-handkerchief again to his eyes, rushed off full of dramatic emotion on the right hand, while Robert disappeared in an equally effective manner on the left.

The wheezy, sickly orchestra struck up another tune—or rather two or three different tunes—or, to be more correct still, apologies for tunes; and the buzz of conversation commenced amongst the audience. There was evidently a strong feeling of curiosity to see how Count Lievebewitz would acquit himself of the donkey-feat—or how he would get out of it: for opinions were certainly divided upon the point,—the occupants of the boxes knowing full well the impossibility of the thing, while those in the pit and gallery seemed to be certain that it would be consummated somehow or another. In this latter opinion the two maids seated next to me seemed to share, and thus formed an exception to the prevalent idea of the box-occupants: for I heard one whisper to the other, "I know how it can be done: the donkey will be drawn up the ladder with ropes."

"Well," answered the parlour-maid, "but how can the conjuror go up too?"

"Oh! depend upon it he will manage."

"Then perhaps you think the young one will really get into a quart-pot? What do you think, Mary?"

"That one is just as likely as the other," was my response, at which both my fellow-servants smiled: for they saw that I was incredulous. And heaven knows I was! but I couldn't for the life of me think how Mr. Tomlinson and my brother would get off the performance of their promises. I knew full well that the former possessed a great deal of ingenuity, and both of them a brazen effrontery, which qualities I conceived would no doubt go far in enabling them to extricate themselves from their dilemma.

But while these reflections were passing through my mind, and while the buzz of conversation was going on around, and the orchestra was pouring forth its blended jingling, dolefulness, shricking, and hoarseness, time was passing away. Ten minutes had elapsed; and the audience began to think this a sufficient interval for the two magnanimous Poles to compose their feelings. Still, however, there seemed to be a spirit of generous forbearance towards men who had seen so many battle-fields, received such numerous wounds, and had lost such immense estates. But when another ten minutes passed, and even the orchestra itself was wearied of waiting and had exhausted all its tunes, real or imaginary, the audience began to show signs of impatience. Several voices from the gallery requested that the performance might begin, or that their money should be returned. The pit next grew clamorous; and then the boxes exhibited symptoms of indignation. But still the conjurors appeared not, although the donkey was waiting at the foot of the ladder. Indeed, by the time half-an-hour had elapsed, the said donkey was the only living thing within the walls that appeared to labour under no feeling of excitement

The disturbance was now alarming: unmistakable threats were fulminated from the gallery—stentorian voices shouted out that the Poles were afraid to come forward. The pit evidently entertained a similar idea: the boxes had by this time seen through the trick. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus grew very much alarmed lest in the confusion the gallery should tumble down upon the box-tier, and the box-tier be thereby precipitated into the pit. But still they did not like to issue forth, because the fly was not ordered to come until ten o'clock; and they knew that if they stood about in the lobby they should catch their death with cold. The theatre was by this time the scene of such confusion as I had never seen before and never saw since. It was a complete Babel of human voices. But all of a sudden an incident took place to concentrate the general attention in one point. This was the abrupt appearance of a little, thin, elderly man, who bounded upon the stage from one of the wings as if he had been tossed thence out of a blanket, or had been impelled by a leap from a springing-board. He looked frantic—waved his arm like a maniac—and gesticulated furiously. There was a dead silence in a moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen—citizens—friends—lend me your ears!" vociferated forth this individual, who, it appeared, was the Lessee of the theatre and the leading tragic actor of his own *corps*: "I come to enlighten you—not to deceive you. Rogues—swindlers—rascals——"

"Does he mean us?" shouted out an indignant voice from the gallery.

"No—heaven forefend!" vociferated the Manager more furiously still. "I mean those Poles. Poles! they are Englishmen—alas, that I should say it,—and swindlers, rogues, villains, rascals of the first water. They have bolted——yes, bolted——with all the receipts, and left me minus all the expenses!"

The rage of the little Manager was so ludicrous that it gave a sort of turn to the proceedings; and shouts of laughter pealed forth from every part of the house. The audience generally seemed for the moment to forget how completely they had been done, in the amusement caused by the wrath of the Manager at having been himself so completely done. The hilarity of the spectators only aggravated the fury of that individual; and he danced and capered about the stage as if he were insane—till at length seizing a cudgel, he found a vent for his rage by belabouring the poor inoffensive ass.

In short, to bring to a termination this adventure which was ludicrous enough to others, but exceedingly painful to me, the audience speedily began to disperse: a hanger-on about the place was despatched to fetch the fly which had brought us thither; and Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus having muffled themselves up with double care to avoid the danger of catching cold, we took our seats in the vehicle and returned home at a much earlier hour than had at first been anticipated.

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CHAPTER LXXV.

A CLUE TO THE READING OF A MYSTERY.

About a week after the adventure described in the preceding chapter, I went down into the kitchen one morning after breakfast, to fetch something required up in the nursery, when I heard the housemaid observe to the cook, "Isn't it strange, though, that he should come back into this neighbourhood after having declared that he would leave it for ever?"

"Perhaps the feeling has gone off," responded the cook; "which is most likely with a young gentleman of his age. One doesn't mope over these affairs for ever. But come—you must look sharp and get the spare bed-room in order."

"So I will," observed the housemaid: and she issued forth from the kitchen.

"I suppose you have heard the news, Mary?" now remarked the cook to me; and on my answering that I did not know what she referred to, she said, "Mr. Cleveland is expected here to-day."

I replied that I did not know who Mr. Cleveland was.

"Well, to be sure!" exclaimed the cook: "not to have heard of missus's nephew—one of the handsomest young gentleman that was ever seen, and the best behaved too, for that matter. Master and missus has received a letter this morning to say that he is coming to pass a few weeks with them. He has been abroad on the Continent for some time; and I am sure I never thought when he went away that he would ever come back again. Ah! poor young gentleman! it was a dreadful blow for him," added the cook, shaking her head: "but I do hope that he has got over it."

Although she was again talking in perfect enigmas to me, I did not like to ask any questions: for I fancied that some family secrets were involved in the matter. At that moment the old gardener came into the kitchen with a face expressive of joy; and he said, "So, cook, I understand we are going to have Mr. Arthur home with us again? Master has just told me so in the garden. He will be down by the four o'clock coach from London. Well, I shall be so glad to see him: it will do my old heart good! He was always good and kind to me; and many's the shilling that he has put in my hand when walking in the garden and watching me at my work. Poor Mr. Arthur!" added the old man, shaking his head as solemnly as the cook had ere now done: "I hope that coming home again won't call up unpleasant things to his mind."

"That's just what I am afraid of," rejoined the cook: "but I suppose that he knows his own feelings best—and perhaps an absence of a couple of years has made an alteration in him."

The old gardener went forth again to his work; and I hastened up to the nursery, having no farther occasion to remain down in the kitchen. I could not however help reflecting upon all that had been said in my presence, and wondering to what secret cause of sorrow allusion had been made in respect to Mr. Arthur Cleveland.

The day was exceedingly fine; so I took the children out for their usual walk. Since the occasion which I have before specified, I had not rambled in the direction of the picturesque cottage: but now, for the second time, I took that same path through the fields. I had no more motive for doing so than on the former occasion: indeed it was almost unconsciously that I found myself proceeding in that direction; but, as before observed, this particular walk presented opportunities of seeking the shade not to be found elsewhere, and the day was again excessively sultry.

I was walking on with my two little charges, thinking of my unhappy brother Robert and wondering what in the end would become of him, when I observed the servant-maid belonging to the young lady of the picturesque cottage. She was approaching across the field with the little child in her arms, and was talking to her (for it was a girl) in the usual strain adopted by those who have the charge of children. The child appeared to be somewhat cross; and the young female was so entirely absorbed in her endeavours to amuse it, that she did not seem to notice me until she came close up to the spot where I was resting with my own two little charges at the time. Then, on perceiving me, the young nursemaid stood still; and after looking at me rather hard, said, "Good morning. Though my missus and your's don't speak to each other, it's no reason why you or I should pass each other by without so much as exchanging the compliments of the day—being neighbours, too, as one may say. Is there any reason?"

"Not in the least that I am aware of," was my answer. "That poor little thing seems to be somewhat fretful——"

"And yet I am doing the best I can to quiet her. There now! she's gone off to sleep, and I am glad of it." Thus speaking the servant-girl seated herself on the grass by my side; and after a few moments' silence, she observed, "I think Miss Temple longed very much to speak to you the other day when we met you walking here a week ago——"

"Miss Temple?" I echoed, almost involuntarily. "Is that the name of your mistress."

"Yes—to be sure," she exclaimed, opening her large eyes—for she was a pretty young girl—and gazing upon me with a mixture of astonishment and curiosity: "didn't you know the name of my missus?—and you living so near, and with the Antrobuses too!"

"No—I can assure you," was my answer, "this is the first time I ever heard the name of your mistress mentioned."

"Then I suppose they don't speak of her down yonder?" continued the girl; and she glanced significantly in the direction of my master and mistress's abode.

"They never speak of her," was my reply.

"Well then, but at all events the servants do?" immediately exclaimed my new acquaintance; "and if so, they must have told you all about it. Come now, what's the use of playing the shy and distant with me? just as if what took place was any fault of mine, or as if we servants should show ill-feeling in the matter."

"I can assure you that the servants at Mr. Antrobus's have never spoken in my presence concerning Miss Temple's affairs: nor have they even mentioned her name—or else it would not have appeared strange to me just now. But as for showing any ill-feeling towards you," I added,

"that is impossible; inasmuch as I have not the slightest reason to do so, and am a perfect stranger to anything which might possibly furnish a motive for such a sentiment."

"I am glad to hear you speak in this manner," responded the servant-girl; "because I really felt that I liked you the first instant I saw you—and Miss Temple also said what a nice-looking young person you were, and how she would have liked to speak to you, when we met you walking here last week. And now that I recollect," exclaimed the girl, "Miss Temple said you seemed so kind and gentle, as if you felt for her sorrows—so that really, notwithstanding all you have said, I must think that you know something about them. But do tell me—where is Mr. Cleveland now?"

"Mr. Cleveland!" I exclaimed in renewed astonishment: and then instantaneously recollecting all the conversation I had heard in the kitchen that morning, I at once associated those allusions with Miss Temple's history, whatever it might be; and I began to have some little glimpse at the solution of the mystery.

"Oh! I see that you are really ignorant of all that has taken place," resumed the girl: and then she went on to say in a mysterious and confidential tone, "Why, you must know that Mr. Cleveland was at one period going to be married to Miss Selina Temple, at about the same time her eldest sister Miss Gertrude was engaged to Lord Davenant. But then Miss Selina's misfortune happened:"—and the young female looked down significantly at the infant which she held in her arms.

I felt as if the shock of a sudden calamity had happened to myself: for notwithstanding all the circumstances which had hitherto tended to excite the belief that the fair creature of the cottage had erred from the path of prudence, I still had cherished the hope that I should eventually hear otherwise. Indeed, I had all along been loath to admit those suspicions which had thus forced themselves upon me; and now that they were so painfully confirmed, I felt as it were a sudden mistrust in human nature itself. That sweet, charming creature, with her spiritual and nymph-like beauty—Oh! it was a distressing thing to contemplate her as a fallen angel!

"You do not know what a good, kind creature Miss Temple is," continued the servant-maid. "I have been with her now two years—ever since little Selina here was born; and she has never said a harsh word to me the whole time. Poor thing! she is so unhappy—and sometimes I catch her crying if I go suddenly into the room. She often locks herself up in her own chamber for hours together; and old Mrs. Danby—that's the only servant she keeps besides me—steals up to the door and listens; and if she hears our dear missus sobbing, she knocks very gently and begs her not to give way to her grief. I am sure I would do anything for the poor dear young lady,—she is so sweet-tempered, and amiable, and kind!"

Here the girl began to shed tears; and I took a liking to her—for I saw that her grief was genuine, and that she was in reality deeply attached to her unfortunate young mistress. She went on to tell me that her own name was Nancy Brown, and that her parents were poor people living in a cottage about half-a-mile distant, and which she pointed out to me amidst the trees. She asked me my name; and I told her—for I found that there was a great deal of artless simplicity about her, and that her questions did not arise from any impertinent curiosity. It also appeared from what she told me that Miss Temple's elder sister, Gertrude, had married Lord Davenant—that they lived in London—and that though since their marriage they had never been to see Selina, and it was even supposed that his lordship had ordered his wife not to hold any communication with her, yet that parcels often came by the coach from the metropolis for the unhappy young lady, and that these no doubt were sent by Gertrude.

"She had a parcel as lately as about a fortnight ago," continued Nancy. "Poor dear creature! when she is expecting anything from London, how she does watch from the parlour-window for the arrival of the coach; and if it passes the door without stopping, how much sadder she grows. But if it does stop, how she hurries forth to receive whatever comes!—and then she goes up to her own chamber and locks herself in, perhaps for two or three hours; but when she comes down again, she always looks as if she had been crying very much. Yet you have no idea, Miss Price, how fond she is of little Selina here—though after all it's the cause of her troubles, poor thing!"

"And does she live all alone in that cottage?" I asked. "I mean, has she no friends or relations with her? are her parents dead?"

"Alas, poor thing!" replied Nancy, her eyes again filling with tears; "it broke her mother's heart two years ago——you know what I mean——and ever since she has lived all alone: for her sister had married just before the mother's death, and as she went with her husband to some foreign part—Italy I think—or at all events, a long way off—to spend the honeymoon, she was not here at the funeral. Indeed the funeral must have been over long before Lady Davenant even heard of her mother Mrs. Temple's death at all. Poor missus! she has only been a few weeks out of mourning. Don't you think she is sweetly pretty? And now that I recollect it, that day she received the last parcel from London, the Autrobuses were in the coach, and you was with them: for missus said last week the moment she met you in these fields, that you was inside the stage along with Mr. Cleveland's uncle and aunt. I think it was the first time that she had met the Autrobuses since everything was broken off between her and Mr. Cleveland two years ago; and so she was very much affected at thus suddenly finding herself face to face with the old people. But do tell me, Miss Price, if you have heard anything said at your place about Mr. Cleveland?"

I did not immediately answer the question; for I did not know whether I ought to be communicative on the subject. But it occurred to me that after all I had heard, it would be but a kind and considerate action to let Miss Temple know that Mr. Cleveland was about to return into the neighbourhood, so that she might avoid the risk of an interview which could scarcely fail to be of a most painful as well as humiliating nature to herself. I accordingly informed Nancy that Mr. Cleveland was expected home that very day—that his room

was prepared for him—and that he would most probably arrive by the London coach which passed along the road at four o'clock.

"Oh, this is indeed important!" exclaimed Nancy: "and I must hurry home and break the intelligence to Miss Temple. Good bye! I dare say we shall often meet in our walks: indeed I hope so!"

We parted—Nancy with the little Selina hastening off in the direction of Miss Temple's cottage, and I retracing my way with my two little charges to our own abode. During the walk homeward I could think of nothing but all that I had heard from Nancy Brown; and I experienced the most compassionate sympathy for Miss Temple; for I felt assured she could not have sinned wilfully, but that some foul treachery or some extraordinary infatuation had proved her ruin. There was one circumstance which appeared to me most strange and mysterious: namely, how it was possible for that fair young creature, when engaged to be married to Mr. Cleveland, to have been beguiled by another from the path of virtue. It was this very mystery which impressed me with the conviction that her's was no common case, and that if all the particulars were known to me I should doubtless find, as I hoped, extenuating circumstances on her behalf.

According to expectation, Mr. Cleveland arrived by the coach that afternoon. He was a tall handsome young man, of about three-and-twenty: indeed, I may say that he was remarkably handsome, with a most gentlemanly bearing and pleasing manners. There was a shade of melancholy upon his countenance, which detracted nothing from its manly beauty, but on the contrary, rendered his appearance the more interesting. Cordial was the welcome which he experienced from Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus; and he on his side appeared full glad to see them again. He had not been in the house many minutes, ere he asked to see the "little ones"—meaning the children; and his good-natured aunt at once rang for them to be brought down. I therefore had an opportunity of seeing Mr. Cleveland almost immediately after his arrival; and I felt convinced that he must be a thorough kind-hearted man by the way in which he caressed the two children and compassionated them for being deprived of the parental care. When I was once again up in the nursery, I could not help thinking to myself that the whole affair relative to Miss Temple seemed more mysterious than ever: for Arthur Cleveland was in all respects a young man well calculated to win the heart of a young lady—and if Selina Temple had at one time accepted the offer of his hand, it was scarcely possible to believe that she did not love him. But if so, still less possible was it to believe that she would in mere wantonness have thrown herself into the arms of another. In short, I perceived that there were many particulars and details requisite to perfect the skeleton of the history which I had received in so meagre a shape from the lips of Nancy.

That same evening the housemaid came up to the nursery to have a chat with me; and after some indifferent remarks, she inquired what I thought of Mr. Cleveland? I replied that from the little I had seen of him, he struck me as being a very kind-hearted gentleman, and that I always thought well of those who were good to children.

"Your opinion, Mary," returned my fellow-servant, "is well formed; for no one could possess a better heart than Mr. Cleveland. I suppose you have heard something about that unfortunate love-affair of his? We don't like to speak of it much, and seldom do. Ah! it was a sad, sad thing, and created a great sensation in this neighbourhood at the time; because it took every one so thoroughly by surprise, the character of the unfortunate girl standing so very high. Indeed, at the moment I first heard of it, I could not possibly believe it. I should as soon have thought our dear old master would have turned out to be a Captain of Banditti, as that Selina Temple could have fallen into error."

"And was she so very guilty?" I asked, anxious for the assurance that some extenuating circumstances existed. "Is it possible that she could have been altogether to blame?"

"It is scarcely credible, such wickedness!" answered the housemaid. "It makes one feel ashamed of one's own sex. It is indeed very sad to think that an angel in outward appearance could be so thoroughly lost to every sense of decency and virtue. It broke her poor mother's heart. But when I say her *poor* mother, I do not know that I ought to have used the expression: for in many ways Mrs. Temple was a worldly-minded woman, and she manœuvred most cunningly to ensnare Lord Davenant for her eldest daughter, Gertrude."

"Was it not then altogether a love-match on both sides?" I asked.

"Oh! I dare say that Gertrude Temple was very much attached to his lordship," rejoined the housemaid: "for he is a fine handsome man, though somewhat proud in character and imperious in manner, as well as stern in look. But then he is handsome and of a commanding appearance—besides being very rich. Therefore, in most respects, it was a capital match for a young lady brought up in the country, and who never could have hoped for so grand an alliance. As for the inequality in their ages, it is not so very much after all—not more than seventeen years."

"I consider that to be a great deal," was my observation.

"Lady Davenant must now be twenty-three, and her husband forty," continued my fellow-servant. "He is still therefore in the prime of life. But there is the bell! I must go and answer it. Perhaps I shall run up again presently:"—and thus speaking, she hastened from the room.

I must confess that I *did* hope that the housemaid would return; inasmuch as I foresaw that if she did, she would prove fully communicative upon all the points that I wished cleared up in Miss Temple's sad history—for my curiosity was certainly piqued to no ordinary extent. At the same time there was one point on which there seemed to be no longer any doubt: namely, that the object of my recent sympathy was very far from being entitled to it; and I deplored—deeply, deeply deplored—the necessity of withdrawing that feeling from Selina Temple. To think that one endowed with so much external loveliness and in the earliest spring-time of her life, should be so tainted with wickedness, was but too well calculated to shock the mind and engender the most disagreeable reflections.

The housemaid did not return to the nursery that evening: she was detained by her duties elsewhere until too late an hour to rejoin me. Somewhat

disappointed, I retired to rest, and dreamt the whole night through of the beautiful Selina Temple.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE SPIES.

THE room which had been appropriated as the nursery, was on the highest storey; and the windows were in the front of the house—therefore looking upon the road. I was standing at one of these windows after breakfast in the morning, and gazing forth upon the beautiful scenery which formed the view from that point, when I was suddenly startled—or rather felt my blood all in a moment congeal in my veins—on observing the two well-known figures of the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge pass by. They were on foot; and so far as I could judge from such a distance—the house standing back about thirty yards from the road—they appeared to be dragging themselves along with the air of men fatigued by a long journey. They also looked as if covered with dust; and I therefore concluded that they must have been on their travels since a very early hour in the morning. But that they were the dreaded individuals whom I supposed, I had not the slightest doubt: my eyesight was good—and even if the distance had been double what it was, I could not have failed to recognize them. But what on earth could they be doing in that neighbourhood? Such was the reflection which had instantaneously suggested itself to my mind; and it was natural, in the first shock produced by the recognition, that I should immediately associate their business near Winchester with myself. I therefore watched with acute suspense to see if they regarded the house in a manner calculated to justify my suspicions. But they did not. On the contrary, they pursued their way without turning their heads at all;—and considerably relieved by this circumstance, I said to myself, "Doubtless my fears are baseless. They cannot know that I am living in this neighbourhood; and even if they did, what object can they possibly have in seeking me out? No: it is a mere coincidence—and I must not give way to ungrounded alarms."

Still I was not altogether satisfied with this conclusion; and I wished I had not seen those dreadful men at all—for I felt that for some time to come this circumstance would prove a source of uneasiness and misgiving to my mind. I felt as Robinson Crusoe must have done when he discovered the print of a human foot on the sea-shore.

It was now the usual time for taking the children out for their morning's walk: but I felt half afraid to do so, lest I should fall in with those fearful characters. Then I reasoned with myself that it was scarcely possible they would have any interest in doing me harm; and moreover, that if they had really come into the neighbourhood on my account, they would not have passed by the house in broad daylight and thus afforded me an opportunity of seeing them. So I summoned all my fortitude to my aid—dressed the children—and took them out for their usual walk. I did not proceed through those fields which led in the direction of Miss Temple's cottage; for it was not my wish to encourage an intimate acquaintance with her servant Nancy,—in the first place, because under all circumstances I felt that it might naturally be displeasing to my master and mistress; and in the second place because I did not choose to let any feeling of curiosity on my own part impel me to throw myself in her way for the purpose of gleaning from her lips whatsoever more she might have to tell me. Therefore I led the children in quite the opposite direction: namely, towards the City of Winchester.

At a distance of about a third of a mile from the house, there was a little grove or knot of trees on a slight rising of the ground; and as the children always liked to play about on the grass and I was accustomed to seek some shady place where I could sit down the while and watch them, I bent my steps towards those trees. Entering the little grove, I seated myself in a place where the hazels and the hawthorns formed a complete bower, with a foliage so thick as to be entirely impervious not merely to the rays of the sun, but also to the eye of any one passing behind;—and opening a book which I had brought with me, I bade the two children play just opposite the front of this natural arbour, so that I could keep a look out upon them and read at the same time. Presently the younger child became sleepy; and lying down on the grass with her head supported upon my lap, she soon fell into a deep slumber. Her brother, in a childish frolic, came and lay down by her side, without however meaning to go to sleep: but he gradually fell off into a doze, and at length slept as soundly as his sister.

All was now silence around me: but this stillness was very shortly broken by the sounds of voices and the rustling of the trees behind the arbour where I and the children were ensconsed. Those voices! I almost immediately recognized them;—and it was accompanied with no slight feeling of alarm that the unmistakable tones of the Bulldog and Sawbridge thus reached my ears.

"Let's lay down here and tuck into our wittals," said the Bulldog. "It's a nice cozie shade when there's such a briling hot sun over one's head—and besides, it's a conwenient spot——"

The rest of the sentence was lost in the noise made by the two men throwing themselves upon the grass within at least half-a-dozen yards of where I was seated. My first impulse was to snatch up the children and hurry away from the spot: for I was filled with apprehension at the unpleasant vicinage of those dreaded individuals. But the thought instantaneously struck me that if I were to move I should awaken the children, and the elder would be sure to speak while the younger was equally certain to cry; so that the attention of the two ruffians would be drawn towards me—and dubious as I was as to the motive of their visit to this neighbourhood, I by no means chose to run the risk of encountering them face to face. I accordingly remained where I was, inwardly hoping that they would take their departure ere the children awoke.

"Come now, Nick," said the Bulldog, "just produce the brandy-flask, and it'll help these cold wittals to go down all the better. Didn't they look rather suspicious on us at that little public-house just now where we got the flask filled?"

"Well, I can't say," returned the well known voice of Sawbridge, "that we're the most fascinating

chaps in existence, all covered with dust as we are. But I say, harn't we had a good long walk of it this morning? On our legs ever since five o'clock!"

"To be sure," responded the Bulldog, with a sort of growl of satisfaction: "that's just the way I like doing things, when there's business in hand. Queer-looking gen'lemen like you and me, Nick, seem out of place when riding by the stage-coaches—and so it's apt to attract notice and raise suspicion. Wasn't it best, therefore, after all, to get that lift down from London in the common carrier's van as far as it came, and then walk all the rest of the way?"

"Well, it's better now that it's over and we've reached the spot at last," rejoined Sawbridge: "but it's rather a tiresome thing to jog along for sixteen miles or so on one's legs when one has got plenty of money in pocket to pay coach-fare. Howsomever, caution was the game, and so we played it. Hand us the brandy-flask, Ben: your're keeping it all to yourself."

"So you see," remarked the Bulldog, after a pause, during which I could distinctly hear that the two men were doing ample justice to their provisions—and the elder ruffian was now evidently speaking with his mouthful; "so you see that the nice-looking house we passed last of all afore we come to the public, was them people's——what's their name again?"

"Antrobus," answered Sawbridge. "But do you think you did right to make the inquiry at the public?"

"Why, didn't I do it in such a way," demanded the Bulldog, "that the landlord and landlady couldn't possibly suspect I had any particular motive in view?"

"And yet, as you yourself said just now," observed Sawbridge, "they did look rayther suspicious at us——"

"Well, after all," interrupted the Bulldog, "what the deuce could they suspect about us? We drank our ale, filled our brandy-flask, and paid for what we had—and that's everything publicans look to. But didn't they give these Antrobuses a good character?—crying 'em up as the nicest and charitablest old couple in all these parts. I made sure it was their house as we passed it; 'cause why, if you recollect we was told it was about a mile farther on the road than Miss Temple's cottage—and *that* we recognised easy enough by the description."

"Yes: and deuced glad I was to recognize it too," observed Sawbridge: "for it showed that we had come to pretty near the end of our journey. But I say, Ben, we didn't look up at the winders of Antrobus's house, or yet stand gaping and gazing about."

"Not us indeed—not such fools!" answered the Bulldog. "Why, in a country place like this, if a couple of ill-looking chaps, as the saying is——"

"This is the second time within five minutes that you've spoke agin your own self, and me too," interrupted Sawbridge, with a coarse laugh.

"If beauty and good looks was made a crime, neither you nor me would ever be taken up for it," replied the Bulldog: "and so there's no mistake about that. But howsomever, as I was saying, if two queer-looking chaps, such as you and me are—a sort of gen'lemen that don't seem able to give a werry good account of theirselves—is observed lurking about a house, or even looking up at it rayther hard, it's immediately set down that a robbery is intended; and then all the inmates is on their guard, and p'raps constables is set to watch——all of which wouldn't suit our book. So that's why I told you to look straight for'ard as we walked along, and not seem to be taking no particklar notice at all of any house we might pass within two or three miles of Winchester."

"Just as if I didn't understand what you meant!" exclaimed Sawbridge. "You seem to take me for a fool, Ben—or else you wouldn't talk such a long rigmarole about your precautions. If you had told me how you thought of proceeding now we have got down here, I should be more obleeged to you: for hang me if I see how we are to watch the chap's movements, without drawing towards us them very suspicions you're so anxious to avoid."

"The best plan," answered the Bulldog, "is to eat and drink first, and then hold a council of war afterwards. So if you've finished the one, let's go seriously to work about t'other."

"I'm done, and prime for the council of war," responded Sawbridge. "You speak first, Ben—as I always look upon you as a sort of leader."

"Well, well," observed the Bulldog, evidently flattered by the compliment: for even the sphere of crime has its aristocracy, its grades, and its degrees: "p'raps I do deserve the title. So now listen. In the first place we've found out that yon house there belongs to these Antrobus people; and we likewise know that Cleveland must now be with them—for with our own eyes we saw him get into the Winchester coach yesterday at the *White Horse Cellar*, Piccadilly. Well, our business is to keep a narrow watch on all his movements, and report progress to a certain party——"

"And most partickler," chimed in Sawbridge, "to see whether he falls in with the Miss Temple which lives in the cottage yonder, and if so, whether they speak, and on what terms they appear to be together. Now, for my part," added Sawbridge, "I think that one of us ought to keep watch near Antrobus's, and t'other near Miss Temple's."

"That's exactly what I was going to recommend," observed the Bulldog: "'cause why, we shall then make sure of watching the actions of both, so that if one should miss Cleveland, t'other would be sure to observe the movements of the young lady; and if they did meet, it wouldn't be lost sight of by one of us."

"Then that's our plan of proceeding," said Nick Sawbridge; "and if so be you're agreeable, I'll take and watch the young lady: 'cause why I do love looking after anything in the shape of a petticoat."

"Just as you like," said the Bulldog. "I'll keep watch on Cleveland. And now that we've had a rest, we mustn't let the grass grow under our feet. You start off first, and keep along them hedges yonder; and so you can work your way round until you get close enough to Miss Temple's cottage to keep a keen eye upon it. I shall wait here till you're at a reasonable distance; and then I'll go and find some shady nook, where I can watch the Antrobus's house: for we mustn't be seen together any more during the day-light. At dusk we'll meet in this very spot again."

"But if the business keeps us engaged a long time in these here parts, such as two or three weeks for instance," observed Sawbridge, "we had better get some change of clothes in Winchester and disguise ourselves: or else we're sure to be noticed by the labourers and people that we may chance to meet in the fields; and if they see us lurking about in the same spot day after day, it's more than likely we shall get took up and hauled afore a justice-of-the-peace as rogues and waggabones—the end of which would be a dance for two months on the everlasting staircase at the county gaol."

"There'll be time enow to discuss all them things to-night or to-morrow," responded the Bulldog: "'cause why, we must sleep in Winchester, you know—for it won't do to go and get beds at that little alehouse where we filled the brandy-flask. But come, you be off, Nick: there's no use in staying chattering here any longer."

The conversation was now brought to a close by the departure of Sawbridge, the sounds of whose retreat amidst the rustling trees I could distinctly hear. Ten minutes then elapsed ere the Bulldog moved from the spot where his companion had left him; and during this interval I was held in one continuous state of terror—a prolonged and awful dread—lest the ruffian should take it into his fancy to stroll amidst the mazes of the little grove ere he followed his companion's example and took his departure. For I felt assured that if he should discover me in a position to convince him that I must have overheard every syllable of the preceding discourse between him and his accomplice, he would not for an instant scruple to make away with me. In the deepest suspense did I watch the countenances of the slumbering children: but they gave no signs of speedy awakening, and slept tranquilly on. At length the Bulldog issued forth from the

grove; and as I heard the sounds of the rustling leaves and the crackling branches, unspeakable was the relief which I experienced. Nevertheless, when those indications of his departure had ceased to be heard, I still remained for nearly a quarter of an hour amongst the trees, so as to give him an opportunity of getting to a distance ere I emerged from my place of concealment. Then I gently awoke the children; and instead of retracing my steps across the fields, I made the best of my way, along with my two little charges, into the main road—because by so doing, the grove remained between the path which we took on the one hand and that which the Bulldog was pursuing on the other.

On reaching the house I did not immediately report what had taken place, but ascended with the children to the nursery, where I sat down to collect my ideas and deliberate upon the proper course to be pursued. The mystery involved in the proceedings of the Bulldog and Sawbridge, was utterly beyond my power of comprehension: for I knew not enough of the past history of Arthur Cleveland and Selina Temple to be enabled to form the slightest conjecture as to who could be interested in employing this pair of ruffians to watch their movements. As a matter of course I felt the necessity of informing Mr. Cleveland of everything I had overheard: but considering that Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus were nervous and timid old people, I thought it expedient to leave it to his discretion whether he would acquaint them with the ominous-looking business. That the Bulldog would speedily discover I was an inmate of the house which he was watching, there could be no doubt; and well aware of his desperate character, I felt that it would not be safe for me to walk out again with the children while he was in the neighbourhood. At all events, I entertained such a horror of the man that I dared not run the risk of encountering him; and thus I saw the necessity not merely of putting Mr. Cleveland on his guard, but also of consulting him relative to the course which I myself ought to pursue.

But how was I to obtain an interview alone with that gentleman? I knew not: and I began to reflect that after all I should be compelled to speak to him in the presence of his uncle and aunt—which I was very loath to do, as I knew it would alarm them terribly to hear that there were two such desperate characters lurking about the neighbourhood and watching the premises, heaven only knew with what ulterior intent! Accident however furnished me with an opportunity of speaking to Mr. Cleveland alone. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus were compelled by some business to go into Winchester for a couple of hours in the afternoon; and Mr. Cleveland, who did not seem much inclined to quit the house on the first day of his sojourn there, remained in-doors. Availing myself of the hour when the little girl was accustomed to sleep after dinner, as a great many children do, I took the little boy down stairs; and confiding him to the temporary care of the old gardener who was engaged in weeding his flower-beds, I at once proceeded to the parlour where Mr. Cleveland was seated. He was reading a book at the time I entered—or rather, he had a book in his hand; but I do not think that he was occupied with its contents—for he wore an air of melancholy abstraction, and did not even immediately notice my appearance. It was with a slight start that he lifted his head as I advanced towards him, saying, "Pardon this intrusion, sir: but it is of the highest consequence that I should speak a few words to you."

He gazed upon me with a degree of astonishment which was natural enough: for he must indeed have felt surprised at being thus addressed by one of the female servants of the household.

"There is no time for much preface to what I have to say," I at once proceeded to observe, speaking hurriedly and somewhat excitedly; for I was fearful of any of the other servants entering the room, in which case it would have appeared odd indeed to find me in conversation with Mr. Cleveland. "Are you aware, sir, of any reasons which could induce persons to watch your movements."

"Heavens, no!" he exclaimed, with an increased astonishment of look.

"Nevertheless, it is so," was my immediate response. "Circumstances, which I need not now pause to explain, have made me aware that there are in the world two dread and desperate characters; and those men are at the present moment in this neighbourhood, charged to espy all your proceedings."

"You surprise me! you astonish me to a degree!" interrupted Mr. Cleveland. "Surely you must be making some mistake? There is no one who can have any interest in watching my movements."

"I do beseech, sir, that you will listen to me:"—and I then went on to explain how it was that I had become a listener to the whole conversation between the Bulldog and Nick Sawbridge in the grove. I was compelled to mention the name of Miss Temple: but I gave utterance to it timidly and hesitatingly—for from all I had learnt, I could but too well conjecture that it would revive the most painful recollections with a too vivid clearness in his mind. And such was evidently the effect produced; for a sombre cloud overshadowed his countenance—a look of the profoundest melancholy settled upon his features—and he could but half repress the sigh which rose suffocatingly up into his very throat.

"This is most extraordinary!" he said, when I had made an end of my narrative. "I cannot possibly comprehend it:"—and he looked bewildered to a degree. "You say," he continued after a pause, "that one man is to watch my movements, and the other to observe the proceedings of—of—that lady whom you have named; and that they are to make communications, if certain things happen, to some person who is employing them? Now, for the life of me, Mary Price, I can no more fathom the meaning of all this than I can penetrate the mysteries of infinite space, or read the secrets of futurity."

Mr. Cleveland appeared to look at me very hard, though not with rudeness, as if to discern whether it were possible that I was in any way deceiving or trifling with him: and I really could not in my heart feel annoyed that he should do this, as the communications I had made were certainly of a startling and bewildering character—all the more so, inasmuch as it appeared that he could not possibly fix his ideas upon any human being who had either a motive or an interest in employing spies to watch him.

"Pardon me," he said, perceiving that I comprehended the nature of the searching look which he bent upon me,—"pardon me if for a moment I seemed to mistrust you: but all you have said is so extraordinary that it is enough to make me disbelieve my own ears."

"I am not offended, sir," was my answer; "because I am a total stranger to you——"

"Not altogether a stranger in name, Mary," he at once observed, a half-smile appearing for a moment upon his countenance; "inasmuch as I have read of you in the newspapers; and therefore knowing how heroic and generous was your conduct at Derby some time ago, I ought not to have mistrusted you even for a single instant now. I presume that you have sought an opportunity of making these strange communications to my ears alone, in order to avoid creating a source of terror for my worthy relatives?"

"Such was my motive, sir: for I need not remind you that Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus are timid and nervous to a degree."

"You have acted wisely, Mary, and with a discretion that demands my gratitude. Again do I apologize for the temporary incredulity which I experienced. It will be much better to keep this affair altogether to ourselves for the present: because if I were to invoke the aid of justice and give these men into custody, it is most probable that they would stoutly deny your testimony, and at all events would find it to their interest to keep their employer's name entirely secret; while on the other hand, it becomes to me a matter of importance to ascertain who it is that has set spies to watch my proceedings, and I must trust to the chapter of accidents to clear up this mystery."

"But in the meantime," I asked, "will it be safe for me to walk out with the children as heretofore? Who knows to what extent the villany of these men may reach?"

"At all events," interrupted Mr. Cleveland, "no part of their proceedings appears to apply to you. What is it that you fear?"

"I have already told you, sir, that circumstances have made me but too well acquainted with the dreadful characters of these men; and they know very well that if I were to see them lurking about in this neighbourhood, I should not keep silent relative to their presence. That they must speedily become aware of the fact that I am a member of this household, is of course certain; inasmuch as they are keeping so strict a watch. May they not therefore think it necessary, in order to ensure the success of their designs, whatever they may be,—to remove me from their path? I shudder when I reflect of what these men are capable!"—and as I thus spoke, all the horrors of that terrible adventure on Shakspeare's Cliff at Dover swept back to my mind.

"The whole affair involves so many points for serious consideration," said Mr. Cleveland, "that it is impossible to make up one's mind how to act all in a moment. But in any case you will not require to walk out again to-day; and to-morrow morning you can take the children for their usual airing: I will watch when you go out, and I will follow you at a short distance. I shall have a brace of loaded pocket pistols about me; and therefore fear nothing. Perhaps in the interval I may have resolved upon some particular course to be pursued, and in that case I will avail myself of the opportunity to make it known to you."

I thereupon retired from the parlour where this conversation had taken place; and returning into the garden again, took charge of the elder child, whom I conducted up to the nursery, where I sat down to reflect once more upon the occurrences of the day. When night came, I experienced a certain degree of nervousness on retiring to rest. I endeavoured to reason myself out of my fears by the reflection that the Bulldog and Sawbridge had come down to the neighbourhood of Winchester to watch the proceedings of two particular persons, and not to commit a burglary in the house: but still it was by no means a pleasant idea to entertain, that a couple of such desperate ruffians were in that part of the country at all, and that they had their attention specially fixed on the dwelling within whose walls I resided. It was a long time ere I could compose my feelings to sleep; and when slumber fell upon my eyes, the images of the Bulldog and Sawbridge haunted me in my dreams.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

MR. CLEVELAND'S HISTORY.

On the ensuing day, at the usual time after breakfast, I took the children out; and knowing that Mr. Cleveland was to follow at a distance, I naturally avoided taking the direction of Miss Temple's abode. I therefore pursued the opposite course, bending my way towards the little grove where I had overheard the conversation between Sawbridge and the Bulldog. But as I emerged from the back-garden into the open fields, I said to myself, "Now, at this very moment, the eyes of the greater villain of the two are upon me. Doubtless he is astonished at seeing me here!"—and I shuddered at the bare idea of being within the range of that terrible man's vision. I felt as an inhabitant of an Oriental clime might be supposed to feel, when penetrating into a jungle where it is known that a monstrous snake is lurking, but the precise whereabouts of which is at the moment a matter of uncertainty; so that if the reptile really means to spring, it is doubtful from which point the perfidious attack is to be made.

I looked round, and observed Mr. Cleveland coming forth in a leisurely sauntering manner from the back-gate of the garden; but still I scarcely experienced any feeling of relief, and certainly no inward conviction of positive safety, because he was not near enough to protect me from any sudden attack. That such an attack would be made upon me was by no means probable, if I had looked coolly and calmly at the matter; but I was not in a mood thus to consider it: sufficient was it for me to know that I was walking in a region where the most desperate of ruffians lay hidden in some nook or corner—and despite my natural fortitude, the circumstance was assuredly enough to excite serious misgivings in my soul. As Robinson Crusoe, to whom I have alluded on a former occasion, was alarmed by every bush and shrub which he saw at a distance as he returned home after beholding the print of the man's foot upon the sea-shore, so did I regard with a certain degree of nervous trepidation every

object which resembled the human shape; and I carefully avoided walking too close to the hedge-rows, lest that man whom I dreaded so much should suddenly start forth. For it would be impossible to describe the horror and aversion—the mingled loathing and terror, which I entertained for Ben the Bulldog.

On approaching the grove, instead of entering it, I passed round, keeping at a convenient distance from its maze of verdure. On reaching the farther side I sat down on a bank, to afford the children an opportunity of having their usual romp in the field. I was watching them as they were thus disporting, when I heard footsteps approach: and looking round, beheld Mr. Cleveland. I immediately rose from my seat; but he motioned me to resume it; and placing himself by my side, he said, "Circumstances have placed us on a certain footing of friendliness with each other—levelling barriers and narrowing distances. You will not therefore feel offended that I accost you thus—that I sit down by you—and that I treat you with a certain familiarity and confidential intimacy——"

"Mr. Cleveland," I observed, interrupting him, "you need say nothing more upon this subject: I can well understand your meaning. There is however something to be considered—which is, that we may be seen together, and this might prove injurious to me."

"Those who are acquainted with me in this neighbourhood," replied Mr. Cleveland, "are well aware that I am incapable of any impropriety of conduct; and if it should reach the ears of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus that I sat with you for half-an-hour this morning, I will at once tell them under what circumstances the interview has taken place. Tell me—have you ever heard the details of my sad history? are you acquainted with the occurrences which have connected my name with that of a certain lady—I mean *her* whom you named yesterday?"

"I have heard some outline of the story," was my answer; "but merely an outline—and that so deficient in particulars as to render many parts of it unintelligible."

"Will you give me leave to unveil the sad narrative in its entirety?" he asked, with a mournful look and in a melancholy voice: "for it is absolutely necessary that we should consult together relative to the proceedings of these men: and you cannot assist me with your counsel unless you are acquainted with all the facts of the case."

"If you consider it requisite, sir, to tell me the history of which you speak, I am prepared to listen."

"I will do so," rejoined Mr. Cleveland: then after a pause, he said, "I must bring myself to mention a name which for two years past I have never been able to utter without experiencing a painful thrill through every fibre of my frame and through every chord of my heart—the name of Selina Temple. Perhaps you have seen her?" he added, turning towards me.

"I have seen her twice," was my answer; "and I must candidly confess that at first I was deeply interested in her; but I have been led to apprehend that my sympathy was somewhat misplaced. I hope—most sincerely hope—I shall hear from your lips that she is *not* beyond the pale of commiseration."

Arthur Cleveland shook his head mournfully; and then, after a brief pause, he proceeded in the following manner:—

"I must begin by stating that I was an only son. My mother died when I was very young; and my father, who was a rich merchant in the City of London, resolved to educate me for the Church. Accordingly, on attaining the age of eighteen, I was sent to the University of Oxford, where I remained for three years. At the expiration of that period my father died suddenly, leaving me a considerable fortune. I must candidly confess that I never had any taste for the clerical profession; and though I had pursued my studies at the University with ardour and perseverance, it was only to give satisfaction and pleasure to the very best of fathers. When my deceased parent's will was opened, a note appeared at the foot, strictly enjoining me not to enter the Church unless my taste was fully in sympathy with that profession; and gladly availing myself of this license, I at once abandoned the career for which I had hitherto been studying. It is now a little more than three years since my father died; and when the funeral was over I resolved upon accepting an invitation which I received to pass a few months with Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. Seven years had elapsed since I had visited them; and then I was a mere boy. At that time, amongst my acquaintances—I may almost say playmates—were the two daughters of a certain Mrs. Temple—Gertrude and Selina. In the busy whirl of subsequent school-occupations and college-pursuits, I had well nigh forgotten them: but on my return to this neighbourhood three years back, I found that the elder had grown up into a splendid young woman of nearly my own age, and the younger into a charming creature of sixteen. Being such near neighbours, the Temples were frequent visitors at the house; and not merely was our acquaintance renewed, but in a few weeks I learnt to love Selina Temple with an enthusiastic adoration. You must pardon me if I dwell for a moment upon that passion the memory of which alone is left to me. The rose of love is crushed and withered within me—but its perfume still remains. It would be impossible for mortal man to concentrate all the purest and holiest affections of his soul more completely on any being, than mine were on Selina Temple. You have seen her, Mary—and you doubtless consider her still beautiful? For that she is so, did I learn from my aunt last night; and yet the angelic sweetness of girlhood must have departed when nature's diadem of purity fell from her brow, and the buoyancy of spirit as well as the freshness which constitute the blooming beauty of youth in its freedom from the world's taint, can exist no longer! If she be beautiful still, in the saddened consciousness of her fall, and with the glow of a chaste mind animating her cheeks no longer, you may imagine, Mary Price, how lovely she must have been at the time of which I am speaking—namely, three years ago. To my eyes she appeared a being too ethereal to belong to this world,—a seraphic embodiment of grace and beauty. There was the joyous sparkle of the glance, the confiding sunshine of the smile, and the elasticity of footstep which scarcely touched the earth, as if she were indeed a being above this world and all things pertaining to it! Such was Selina Temple at the time when I renewed my acquaintance with her and learnt to love her. Love! it was an

adoration and a worship, such as man bestows not often upon woman: and methought that *her* love was as profound and deathless in return. About the same time of which I am speaking, Lord Davenant proposed for her elder sister Gertrude. I offered my hand to Selina, and she accepted me, it being understood that our marriage should take place at the expiration of the year's mourning for my deceased father. Mrs. Temple was rejoiced at the bright prospects which thus opened themselves for her daughters, as she was by no means well off, being the widow of an officer in the navy and entirely dependent on a pension which would of course die with her. Moreover, she was of extravagant habits, and instead of living in becoming seclusion at her picturesque little cottage, was fond of society, and not only visited a great deal, but gave parties in return. She was a thorough woman of the world, and had mixed thus in the gaieties of life as much for the purpose of pushing off her daughters as to gratify her own tastes. Supremely happy, then, was Mrs. Temple at the circumstance of a rich nobleman becoming the suitor for her elder daughter, and a gentleman of fortune such as myself proposing to her younger child. And now one word relative to that elder daughter Gertrude. She was about four years older than Selina, and of a far more stately and commanding beauty. Or to speak with greater accuracy, it might be said that Gertrude was splendidly handsome, while Selina was exquisitely beautiful. Gertrude was of tall figure and finely developed shape, with dark hair and eyes, and a look indicative of a proud spirit and a haughty soul. She had none of the softer amiabilities and gently winning graces which corresponded so admirably with the ethereal and spirit-like beauty of her sister. Gertrude seemed born to shine in the splendid saloons of fashion,—Selina to embellish some beautiful and picturesque rural habitation surrounded with verdure and with flowers—the fitting divinity of that self-same cottage in which she dwelt. Such were the impressions which the appearance and disposition of the two sisters respectively made upon the minds of those who were acquainted with them."

Mr. Cleveland paused—and, perhaps involuntarily, turned his head in the direction of the picturesque cottage, which standing on a slight eminence, was just visible amongst the trees at a distance. He gazed long and steadfastly, but with a deep mournfulness which showed how fondly he had loved, and how deeply he felt the wreck of all the hopes which had once inspired his heart.

"But I will not dwell too long," he resumed, "upon the details of that period when Selina Temple was all in all to me, and when I believed her as incapable of faithlessness as it is impossible for the driven snow to sully its own purity. Suffice it to say that I looked forward to the time when the solemn rite of matrimony was to make her mine, with the confidence of establishing my happiness on the most solid foundation. It was arranged that the two marriages should take place about the same period—that of Gertrude with Lord Davenant, and that of Selina with myself. And now I must proceed to observe that at the time of which I am speaking, Winchester was particularly gay, and there was a constant series of balls, parties, and festivities. In these I of course could take no part on account of the recent death of my father and the mourning-garb which I wore; and I therefore led a comparatively secluded life beneath the roof of my worthy relatives, the only visits I paid being to Mrs. Temple's cottage. On the other hand, Lord Davenant was extremely fond of society; and by his wish Gertrude was present at all the parties given at the time. Of course she could not go alone; and therefore Mrs. Temple was necessitated, even if her own inclinations were not concerned, to escort her;—and for the same reason it was equally impossible to leave Selina in solitude at the cottage. Sometimes Selina insisted upon passing the evening at my uncle's and aunt's instead of accompanying her mother and sister to some gay party; and she constantly gave me the assurance that if it depended upon herself, she would always pass her evenings thus than go to any of those parties at all. How firmly did I believe her!—and who indeed, when gazing upon her angelic countenance, as she gave these assurances with an air of such artless simplicity, could possibly suspect that there was duplicity in her soul? And yet, even at that very time—as the result will show—must she have been playing a game of the darkest, deepest, most criminal hypocrisy. But I, in my illimitable confidence, believed all she said; and I persuaded her to pursue those recreations which I fancied at the time to be necessary as it were for the formation of the character and the modelling of the behaviour of a young lady just entering upon the great theatre of the world. Moreover, as I myself was incapacitated by the recent death of my father from mingling in gay and festive scenes, I considered that it would be unkind and churlish to a degree to deprive her of those innocent amusements which were suitable to her age, as well as to the position which as the wife of a wealthy man she appeared destined to occupy in society. I therefore used to tell her that she should devote her mornings and afternoons to me, that we might ramble together in the fields, or sit in an arbour of her garden to read our favourite authors together; but that her evenings she must devote to the same pursuits as her mother and sister. I must now inform you that at the period of which I am speaking, a dashing regiment of dragoons were quartered in Winchester; and the officers were naturally in great request at all the balls and parties given in the city or its environs. It was indeed their presence at Winchester which created such an unusual round of gaieties; and I must add that this regiment had already been stationed there some six or eight months at the time when I came on that visit to my uncle and aunt. Amongst the officers was a certain Captain Tollemache—one of the handsomest men that ever wore the most attractive uniform in the military service. He was about six-and-twenty years of age—unmarried—a great favourite with everybody—courted by the men as an excellent fellow, and pronounced by the ladies to be a most engaging, fascinating, and agreeable companion. At the same time he had the reputation of unscrupulous honour; and his general good character was such that even the most particular fathers and mothers did not object to allow him to visit at their houses. Indeed, he was a general favourite. He could talk politics with old gentlemen; and whatever their opinions, he contrived to avoid dispute, although never compromising his own. To elderly ladies, dowagers, mammas, and

old maids, he manifested a courtesy of attention not usually shown by dashing young men of his age and position. He used frequently to visit at Mrs. Temple's; and indeed when I came into the neighbourhood, I found that he was on terms as intimate there as at most other houses. He was wont to take new music to the young ladies, wrote poems in their *albums*, and paid them all those little courtesies and attentions which are common in genteel life, and which have no ulterior meaning attached to them. For everybody said that Captain Tollemache was not a marrying man; and his high reputation appeared an adequate guarantee against the possibility of his harbouring dishonourable views. Lord Davenant was not jealous of the Captain on account of Gertrude; and assuredly I was not in respect to Selina. On the contrary, I formed a very sincere liking for Captain Tollemache; and we used frequently to walk or ride out together. His horses were always at my service; and in many ways did his actions seem to prove that my friendship was reciprocated."

Here Mr. Cleveland paused again. This time he did not gaze in the direction of the cottage, but bent his looks downwards in deep and melancholy abstraction. I said nothing—but awaited with some degree of curiosity for the continuation of his narrative.

"Six months passed away," he resumed at length, "and I was then compelled to return to London. During my absence, the solicitors who were entrusted with the settlement of my deceased father's affairs, had made considerable progress in the business; and my presence in the capital became necessary for the final arrangements. I have already told you that my father was a merchant; and as he died in excellent circumstances, leaving me a considerable fortune, I did not choose to carry on his business. I had therefore given directions to have it disposed of; a purchaser had been found—negotiations were carried on—and it now needed my assistance to terminate the matter. I must however add that my father had established branch houses on the Continent; and it was imperatively necessary for me to repair thither with the purchaser of the business, in order to induct him into full possession of the extensively ramified concern. In short, there was every prospect of an absence of several months, inasmuch as I deemed it desirable to have all my affairs fully settled previous to my marriage, in order that no cares of business might mar the happiness of that wedded state to which I looked forward which such blissful anticipation. I took leave of Selina; and we parted with the most fervid protestations of continued love and devotion. How profound appeared her grief! and Oh, the tears which stood upon her cheeks seemed pure as the dew in its gem-like brilliancy on the modest leaves of the rose. Yes—we parted! I took leave also of her mother and sister—of Lord Davenant and Captain Tollemache—of my uncle and aunt—and proceeded to London. If anybody had then whispered in my ear the faintest syllable shadowing forth what was destined to occur, I should have repelled the prophecy with mingled indignation and scorn, and denounced the prophet as the vilest of calumniators. Indeed it was with the fullest confidence that at the expiration of the period of my absence I should return to find a pure, and loving, and affectionate creature waiting to become my bride,—it was in such confidence as this, I say, that I took my departure. I was detained in London about two months, and so much occupied every day as to be totally unable to pay a visit to Winchester; and then my journey to the Continent was hurried by circumstances which I need not mention, they being purely of a business character. The affairs of the branch-houses, and the formalities of transferring them to the purchaser of the business, occupied me during the four months that followed; and thus it was altogether six month since I parted from Selina Temple. During that period I heard from her constantly; and her letters breathed the purest and sincerest affection. When I think of those letters, and then reflect upon the depth of guilt and shame in which she was all the while plunged, I am astounded at the association of so much tremendous hypocrisy with one so young and apparently so artless. But it does not bear thinking of. It is one of those occurrences in life which defy all ordinary calculations and ideas in respect to human nature: or rather, may I not say that it is something to make one doubt the whole world—sufficient to destroy every particle of confidence in one's fellow creatures? But let me make as speedy an end of my narrative as possible. My affairs on the Continent being at length finished, at the very time when my year's mourning for my father expired, I returned to England,—having previously written letters to Winchester to notify the fact. Yes—I returned, resolved to lose no time in speeding back to the place which contained all I held dear upon earth. My purpose was to remain but a few hours in London, and then travel on to my ultimate destination. Conceive, therefore, my astonishment when on arriving in London, I found my uncle and aunt waiting there to meet me; and at the very first moment I encountered them, I saw by their looks that there was something wrong. A terrible misgiving seized upon me—but of a very different character from the real truth. I fancied that Selina was ill, or that she was dead—and I trembled so that I could hardly speak. My uncle and aunt besought me to summon all my fortitude to my aid, as they laboured under the painful duty of having terrible tidings to impart. Then I felt assured that my worst fears were confirmed, and that Selina was no more. Heaven forgive me if I say that it had been better to have heard even *this* than the intelligence which was in store for me! But let me come to the point. It appeared that a circumstance of terrible shame and scandal had taken place all on a sudden at Mrs. Temple's cottage, only three days before this meeting with my uncle and aunt in London. In the dead of night a surgeon had been fetched in the utmost haste from Winchester; and shortly after his arrival at the cottage, Selina Temple became a mother. The utmost endeavours were made to hush up the matter; but the medical man incautiously said enough to his own wife on his return home, to enable her to comprehend what had occurred—and as she for some reason entertained a feeling of jealous malignity towards the Temples, she spread the affair abroad. It flew like wildfire, taking every one throughout the neighbourhood with a surprise amounting to a consternation. The name of the seducer also transpired—and this was Captain Tollemache! Such was the terrible an-

nouncement which my uncle and aunt broke to me as delicately as they could: but despite all their kind consideration, it came upon me with an overwhelming effect. A thunderbolt falling at my feet could not have produced a sensation more astounding: but that thunderbolt would have been mercy had it fallen on my head. Was it possible that human nature could be guilty of such consummate wickedness? Why, at the very time when Selina Temple received the avowal of my love, accepted my suit, pledged me her troth, and consented to become my bride in due course,—at that very time, I say, must she have been a lost and fallen creature! Yes: and throughout the interval of my absence too, during which she had written so many letters replete with such assurances of undivided love and continued affection, must she have been aware of the state in which her frailty had placed her, and which could experience no other catastrophe than that of shame! But I cannot dwell upon this subject, so fraught with painful reminiscences for me. Doubtless you can understand all I must have felt—all I must have endured? For several days I alternated between the ravings of frenzy and the despondency of despair,—in either mood seeming quite capable of self-destruction. From my uncle and aunt did I experience the kindest and tenderest ministrations: but where was the balm that the world could furnish for wounds so deep as mine? where was the anodyne which mortal hands could minister to sooth a grief so stupendous as that which filled my heart? At length, when my mind had regained so much of its composure as to leave me the master of my actions, I sped away to the Continent, resolving upon a long absence, in the hope that by persevering travels I might be enabled to mitigate the poignancy of my anguish in the rapid succession of changing scenes. I corresponded occasionally with my kind relatives, and from them learnt the incidents that took place in England. Thus I was informed that Lord Davenant honourably fulfilled his engagement with Gertrude, from which he was not deterred by the shame that had overtaken her sister. I likewise learnt that Mrs. Temple had died of grief—or, as worthy Mrs. Antrobus expressed it, of a broken heart; and that the unhappy Selina continued to inhabit the cottage with the innocent offspring of her shame. Before I bring my narrative to a conclusion I must inform you that when upon the Continent I frequently met Lord and Lady Davenant, who were likewise travelling in foreign parts. As a matter of course I did not testify towards her ladyship any reserve or coldness in consequence of the deceit her sister had practised towards me, and in which she herself was, I all along believed, far from being an accomplice. Once—and once only—was the name of Selina mentioned by Lady Davenant and me; and on that occasion it happened that we were alone together. In delicate and gentle terms did she approach the subject, saying that she knew it was as painful a one to me as it was for herself, but that she could not do otherwise than avail herself of the opportunity to give me a few words of explanation, so as to justify herself in respect to any suspicion that might be lurking in my mind as to her knowledge of her sister's misfortune previous to its exposure. She then went on to assure me that neither she nor her mother had suspected Selina's position until the very last hour. But I will not, Mary Price, dwell longer on this point: suffice it to say that Lady Davenant fully convinced me that she was no accomplice in the duplicity practised by her unfortunate sister towards me. *That* was the only occasion on which Selina's name was ever mentioned by her ladyship; and Lord Davenant, with a considerate delicacy, forbore altogether from any allusion thereto. I need scarcely tell you that I did not court their society more than was necessary in the Continental towns where I met them. Not that I had the slightest ill-will towards her ladyship; but because I never could find myself in her presence without experiencing a poignant revival of all the bitterest recollections. That she herself deeply feels her sister's disgrace, I am confident: for her ladyship is *not* happy—and often did I notice that she fell into moods of a painful abstraction. The last time I saw Lord and Lady Davenant on the Continent, they expressed themselves in the most friendly and earnest terms, to the effect that they hoped when I revisited England (whither they themselves were then about to proceed) I would call upon them; and I could not without rudeness avoid giving an affirmative promise. Accordingly, on arriving in London the other day, I did repair to Davenant House, and paid my respects to its noble owners. They received me with the kindest attention; and when I informed them that I purposed passing a few months with Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, his lordship generously declared his unfeigned delight at the intelligence—thereby meaning that he was pleased to observe the composed and altered state of my mind. Lady Davenant said nothing: but her looks showed how painfully the recollections of the past had just been revived in her mind by the mention of the circumstance that I was about to revisit the neighbourhood in which her unhappy sister dwelt. And now, Mary Price, that you are acquainted with all the details of this melancholy narrative, perhaps you may wonder that I should have come to such a resolve as that of visiting my relatives again? But in the first place I owe them many obligations; and it was my bounden duty to triumph so far over my own feelings as not to allow them to stand in the way of doing my duty towards such kind relations. And know you not, Mary Price, that there is in the human heart a certain feeling—whether a morbid or a healthful one, I cannot say—but which invariably prompts impulsive man to revisit sooner or later the scenes where his happiest or his most wretched recollections are centred. And so it is with me. One thing however I assuredly did dread—which was the chance of a meeting with Selina Temple. But ere I came down hither I reasoned to myself that as she would be certain to hear of my arrival, she herself would adopt every precaution to avoid an encounter. But now that I *am* here, I have not altogether that same dread of meeting her; and at this moment, after I have so long been speaking of her, I almost feel as if it would be a melancholy pleasure for me to see her once again."

Mr. Cleveland paused—and I gazed upon him with some degree of curiosity and amazement: for it seemed singular indeed that he should speak thus of a meeting with the authoress of all his sorrows.

"No, no—I said too much—I spoke unguardedly," he abruptly exclaimed, with much excitement. "It

would not do for us to meet. If we did I ought to turn away from her in scorn — or else overwhelm her with reproaches. But I could do neither. Good heavens! to think that I speak of treating with scorn her whom I once loved so tenderly—so devotedly! And, Oh! must there not have been some foul and diabolical treachery practised by that consummate villain who led her from the paths of virtue?——Yes: but even granting *that*, still no power of sophistry could furnish extenuation for the long course of duplicity which she practised toward myself—deep, vile, terrible duplicity! Oh, now my blood boils as I think of it! No, no—assuredly I must not stand the chance of encountering her!"

Throughout this speech Arthur Cleveland had shown more excitement and deeper varieties of feeling than during the whole course of the narrative of his unfortunate love: and stopping suddenly short, he covered his face with his hands and remained for more than a minute absorbed in the saddest reverie. I said nothing, but sat reflecting on the painfully interesting and truly extraordinary history which I had heard, and which was far more romantic and seemed to delineate a more startling phase in the progress of human hypocrisy than anything which the pen of the novelist ever had sketched out.

"And now, Mary," resumed Mr. Cleveland, slowly removing his hands from his countenance and turning his looks towards me,—"now that you have heard my story, can you see your way one whit more clearly towards the unravelment of the mystery of this watch which is set upon my movements?"

"I must confess," was my response, "that I cannot. I thank you, sir, for the trouble which you have given yourself in telling me this history, and for the confidence which you repose in me: but frankly do I declare that I am as much at a loss as ever to account for the proceeding instituted by means of these two men. Might I ask, sir, if you are aware what has become of Captain Tollemache?"

"I forgot to mention just now that in some of the earliest letters which I received from my uncle and aunt after leaving England to travel upon the Continent, they stated that Captain Tollemache had suddenly left Winchester at the very time the exposure took place, and that he had been no more heard of. Subsequently, it appears, he sold out of his regiment, and all trace of him then seemed to be lost. But do you know, Mary, that two or three times while I was travelling on the Continent, it struck me that I caught a glimpse of the villain: still upon each occasion it was only a glimpse, and one so fleeting that it left no certainty as to the fact behind it. I am, however, inclined to believe that my conjecture was right, because on each occasion the individual whom I fancied to be Captain Tollemache, disappeared with an abruptness as if he were anxious to escape from my notice. I may add, too, that each time this circumstance occurred I made inquiries in the particular towns where I thought I saw him, to ascertain if such an individual were there: but I could obtain no satisfactory information upon the point. But why did you ask me what had become of this man? Did it strike you that he might be at the bottom of the spy-system instituted in respect to myself and Selina Temple?"

"Such an idea did certainly occur to me for the moment," was my answer,—"but only for the moment—because a second thought convinced me that it could not be so."

"No," rejoined Mr. Cleveland: "for what earthly interest can Captain Tollemache have in making himself acquainted with my movements? From what my aunt told me last evening, he has never been seen nor heard of in this neighbourhood since the exposure of the ruin which he wrought. He cannot therefore be jealous of Selina Temple, as he has no farther intercourse with her. What conjecture are we to form, therefore, respecting these spies?"

"I know not," was my reply. "But what course do you intend to pursue? Will you allow these dreadful men to remain in the neighbourhood? or does it not strike you, sir, that when they shall have well watched particular premises and made themselves thoroughly acquainted with all the movements of the inmates, they are quite capable of breaking into those premises for the purposes of robbery? In short, there is no safety either for your uncle's house or Miss Temple's cottage, so long as these desperate characters are lurking about in the vicinage."

"Your observations are most just, Mary," rejoined Mr. Cleveland. "And yet, as I observed to you yesterday, it is absolutely necessary that I should find out who is the author of this deliberate and deeply arranged scheme of espial. Perhaps," he added in a musing tone, "there may be some circumstances connected with the past, of which I myself am unaware, but which on the other hand are known to Selina Temple, and which would afford a clue to the development of this mystery. Perhaps, too, if she herself were informed that spies are set to watch our motions—and especially to ascertain whether we meet at all, and if so, upon what terms we meet,—perhaps, I say, if she were told all this, she might judge from circumstances known to herself who is the person likely to be the employer of these men. Now, Mary Price," asked Mr. Cleveland, turning somewhat abruptly towards me, "will you do me a favour?"

"With pleasure," I answered: "because I know full well that you will make no request which I may not pledge myself beforehand to grant."

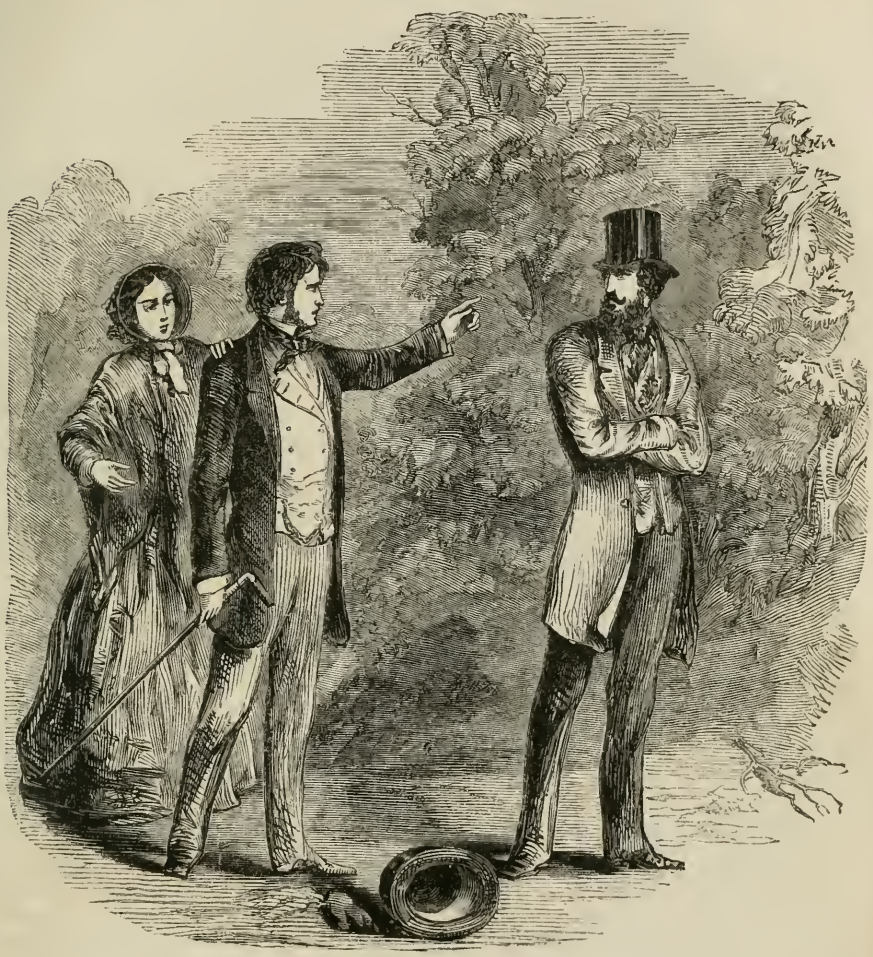
"Then," at once rejoined Mr. Cleveland, "you must see Selina Temple and make her acquainted with everything you know in respect to these men."

"And am I to tell her, sir," I asked, "that it is by your wish I take such a step?"

"Mary," he replied gravely, "I must leave it to your own good sense and delicacy of feeling to make as little allusion to me as possible. But you *will* see her—you will not fly from the promise you have given me?"

"I will see Miss Temple, sir, since such is your desire. But observe—these men who are watching will not fail to notice that I pay a visit to the cottage, and they may perhaps suspect that I am in some way bent in frustrating their designs: for it would not be the first time," I added, as the recollection of the rescue of little Isabella Clementina from the hands of those ruffians occurred to my mind.

"They can scarcely put such a construction upon



the simple fact of your paying a visit to Miss Temple's abode. At all events you *must* incur the risk. And now tell me, how is it to be managed? Can you not obtain leave of absence this afternoon for an hour or two?"

"Mrs. Antrobus would ask me whither I was going, and I could not tell her a falsehood."

"Excellent girl!" exclaimed Mr. Cleveland: "pardon me if for a moment I appeared to suggest anything savouring of duplicity. No—I did not mean *that:* for it did not strike me at the time that you would be questioned as to your object in going out alone. I must leave you to suggest your own plan—unless indeed you wish me at once to tell my uncle and aunt everything that has taken place, and thus make them aware of the commission wherewith I have entrusted you in respect to Miss Temple?"

"No—I do not wish you to adopt this course," said I, after a few moments' reflection: "for I am very sure that my master and mistress would be made really ill with alarm if they knew that these desperate characters were lurking about the house. But I tell you what I will do, sir. This evening, at about six o'clock, I will take the children for a walk in the direction of the cottage: you must follow at a convenient distance—and then I will leave the children for a little while in your charge, while I pay the visit which you desire."

"Be it so," observed Mr. Cleveland. "And now, Mary, let me express my thanks for the interest you are taking in this matter."

He then left me; and I retraced my way with the children homeward, Mr. Cleveland still following at a certain distance so as to protect me from harm. I however saw nothing of either of the dreaded individuals, and reached the house in safety

CHAPTER LXXVII.

SELINA TEMPLE.

According to the plan laid down, I took out the children for another walk towards the cool of the evening: and Mr. Cleveland, who had taken care to keep due watch for my egress, followed at a distance. I still felt rather nervous in respect to the probable appearance of either of the ruffians in my path: but my apprehension was not near so great as in the morning—because I reflected that it was in the district which Sawbridge had undertaken to watch that I was now proceeding, and I did not stand in so much dread of this individual as of his more horrible and more unscrupulous accomplice. But nothing occurred to justify any alarms which I entertained on the subject; and in a short time I reached the close vicinage of the picturesque little cottage. I paused in the shade of a knot of trees until Mr. Cleveland came up; and then leaving the children in his charge, I proceeded hurriedly on towards Miss Temple's abode.

I had to pass round into the main road in order to enter the little garden in front of the cottage; and even before I reached the front door it was opened by Nancy Brown, who appeared as much delighted as she was surprised to see me. She hurried out to greet me; and thinking that I had come to pay her a visit, invited me up to her own room; but I soon informed her that I sought an interview with her mistress if it were convenient for Miss Temple to grant it. Nancy opened her eyes still more widely in amazement: for it naturally struck her that I had come with some message from my master's house. But in order not to keep the poor girl in unnecessary suspense, much less buoy her up with any hope that Mr. Cleveland's presence in the neighbourhood might chance to inspire in respect to her mistress, I hurriedly gave her to understand in a few words that something had come to my knowledge which I thought Miss Temple should be made acquainted with. Nancy requested me to wait in the passage for a moment while she communicated with her mistress; and she entered the parlour opening thence. Almost immediately issuing forth again, she bade me walk in; and in another instant I found myself in the presence of the beautiful creature who until lately had filled me with so deep an interest.

I felt a strange palpitation at the heart at thus finding myself face to face and alone with Miss Temple: for Nancy immediately retired from the room on introducing me thither. It was a neat little parlour, well and prettily furnished, and in every way corresponding with the picturesque appearance of the exterior of the dwelling. Miss Temple was seated at a table, with a volume of poems open before her, and which she had evidently been reading. She could scarcely conceal, much less altogether subdue, her agitation on beholding me: the colour went and came rapidly upon her countenance—there was the glistening of suspense in her blue eyes—her vermilion lips quivered—and her bosom palpitated with visible heavings beneath the modest high-bodied dress. She bade me sit down, speaking in a voice so tremulously clear and so sweetly musical, that it touched the tenderest chords in my heart. All my interest—or I might rather say all my sympathy—suddenly revived in her behalf; it was almost impossible to gaze upon her countenance and believe that she had been deliberately, wantonly, and wilfully wicked: but the supposition which was the most natural seemed to be that there was some profound mystery or some dread fatality which had involved that angel-like creature within the inextricable meshes of the saddest destiny.

"I hope you will forgive me, Miss Temple," I began, "for this intrusion: but as I just now intimated to your servant, something has come to my knowledge with which I considered you ought to be made acquainted. Not to waste words in an unnecessary preface, I must inform you at once that there are spies watching your house—watching also your movements!"

Miss Temple surveyed me with an astonishment which evidently sealed her lips and paralysed the power of utterance.

"You may well be amazed," I went on to say; "but it is as I tell you. There are two men of desperate characters and capable of any atrocity, lying in wait in the vicinage—one watching this house—the other watching my master's dwelling."

"Your master's dwelling?" said Miss Temple, as if galvanized by my words, so that the faculty of speech returned to her all in a moment. "Is this possible? are you not labouring under some mistake?"—and I saw that she was nervously agitated.

"Miss Temple," I said, hesitatingly, and with diffidence approaching the subject, "you must pardon me if in what I am about to state I am compelled to mention a certain name——"

"Oh, I understand you! I understand you!" interrupted the unhappy young lady, with a sudden paroxysm of hysterical anguish: and she burst into tears. Covering her face with her hands, she sobbed convulsively, the tears tracing their pearly path between her fingers and her whole frame agitated with the strength of her affliction. "Excuse this weakness," she presently said as she slowly passed a handkerchief over her eyes; and I can assure the reader that at the moment I saw but dimly, for my own eyes were also filled with tears. "And now proceed with what you had to say—— do not hesitate——I am more composed now—— do speak!"

"These men to whom I have alluded," I continued, "were settling their plans yesterday in that grove which stands a short distance beyond my master's house; and they little suspected I had sought refuge there from the heat of the sun. I overheard everything that passed between them. They spoke of some person who had employed them to watch the motions of yourself on the one hand, and of——of—Mr. Cleveland on the other."

"Good heavens! what can be the meaning of this?" exclaimed Selina Temple, in mingled surprise and alarm. "They said not who their employer was?"

I answered in the negative; and went on to say, "It appears that they watched Mr. Cleveland take his departure by the coach from London; and they followed him down without much loss of time. At this very moment I have every reason to believe that one of the men is secreted at no great distance from your house, Miss Temple; and the other is in

the neighbourhood of my master's. But I have something more to tell you—which is that they have special instructions——pardon me if I must again allude to Mr. Cleveland——"

"Go on, go on!" ejaculated Miss Temple nervously; for it was evident that the mention of her former lover's name excited her powerfully.

"The object of these men, Miss Temple," I continued, "is of a strange and incomprehensible character——unless indeed you yourself can find some key to the reading of the mystery. But I will be explicit. Their instructions in short, are to watch the movements of yourself and Mr. Cleveland—to see whether you meet,—if so, upon what terms you appear to be——"

"Oh! what can be the meaning of all this?" again ejaculated the young lady, now still more painfully excited than before. "You ask me for a key to the mystery? I cannot furnish it——unless indeed——but no, no," she added, interrupting herself with hysterical quickness;——"I know not what to think—what to say!"

She rose from her seat, and walked in an agitated manner about the room. I said nothing, but waited until this access of cruel excitement should have passed off, or at least subsided, ere renewing the conversation. I could not however help following her with my eyes; and as I regarded the angelic beauty of her countenance and the sylph-like symmetry of her shape, the whole figure invested with so ethereal a beauty, I could not help feeling a rapidly augmenting interest in this charming creature, around whom, notwithstanding all I had heard concerning her from the lips of Mr. Cleveland, there seemed to hang a mystery that was not all completely penetrated. Indeed, as I thus gazed upon her, I lost sight of the dark side of her character, as I had so recently had it depicted to me; and I beheld in her only the young, beautiful, and nymph-like creature who was supremely unhappy!

For several minutes did she walk to and fro in the room in a state of nervous agitation—at times suddenly turning towards me as if about to say something which the next instant she recalled even in her thoughts before it was uttered; and then stopping short as if struck with some new idea—perhaps a conjecture towards the solution of the mystery—and appearing to reflect upon it profoundly. At length she resumed her seat; and then in a low, deep, but tremulous voice, she said, "Have you told all this to—to——Mr. Cleveland?"

"I have," was my answer. "I felt it my duty to do so. But I beseech you, Miss Temple, not to allow what has taken place between us to agitate you in this manner: for I see that you *are* agitated!"

"Oh! as you must be well aware of all the circumstances," she exclaimed, with an hysterical outburst of anguish, "you cannot be surprised if I should be thus afflicted. And yet I will be calm—Oh, I will be calm! I have forgotten myself—I ought not to have given way thus! You say that these men whom you overheard conversing, spoke of an employer—but they said nothing to afford you the slightest idea who that employer is? Now tell me—strive to recollect—did they speak of that employer as man or woman?"

"I do not recollect. And yet to the best of my knowledge, I should say that their employer is of the male sex. But I am not certain—it may be otherwise—and since you have put the question, I feel myself involved in doubt upon the subject."

Miss Temple again relapsed into silence, and reflected profoundly. At length raising her eyes slowly, she said in a mild and gentle voice, "You regarded me the other day with so much generous sympathy, that I was half inclined to speak to you. I am sure that you are a good-hearted young woman; and there is something in your appearance which at first sight interested me deeply. I felt as if I should like to have such a companion as yourself to live with me—to cheer me in my loneliness, if possible—to be the confidante of my sorrows——No, no! not the confidante!" she added quickly, and as if to recall the very words themselves which she had just uttered.

"I thank you sincerely, Miss Temple," said I, "for the kind words you have addressed to me. I did indeed feel interested in you; and if it were in my power——But I must not intrude upon your time any longer:"—and I rose from my seat as I spoke.

"You do not intrude," she immediately exclaimed. "On the contrary, your presence here is fraught with consolation. Oh! I should like to question you upon many things: but I dare not—no, I dare not. Tell me, however—oh, do tell me—does he——you know to whom I allude——does *he* seem still to remember what has passed? Is there a cloud of melancholy upon his brow? or has he banished me from his memory?——Yes, yes—he must have done so! I will not ask you the question—or rather, I will not require you to answer it. But, good God! if he knew all——Oh, it is terrible to smart under all this! The world has never known excruciations so poignant as these which I endure. There has been anguish crucifying enough at death-beds—anguish deep and profound enough by grave-sides in church-yards—anguish horrible and rending enough in the condemned cells of the felons' gaols! But oh! all these are light and trivial—the veriest trifles floating in the air—in comparison with the anguish which rends *my* heart! Mary Price—for I know your name, you see—if you were my bitterest, bitterest enemy, I could not wish that you should know what I know and feel what I feel: but as you are one of tender disposition and kind heart, and whom it would be impossible to regard otherwise than as a friend, I beseech and implore Almighty God to shield you from ever enduring the most infinitesimal part of all that I endure!"

Selina Temple ceased: but now she shed no tears—she sat like the effigy of grief in the mansion of despair—gazing upon me with a look so sad, Oh! so profoundly sad, that I felt my heart swelling as if it must burst. My feelings well nigh overcame me—the tears rolled down my cheeks—and at that moment I experienced a boundless and illimitable sympathy for Selina Temple.

"You must go now," she said, somewhat abruptly rising from her seat. "Not that I wish to get rid of you: no, no—heaven forbid! On the contrary, I would that you could stay with me altogether: but while you are here I feel that I wish to question you upon those topics relative to which I ought not to speak, and concerning which it would be impossible for you to give me cheering answers. Yet one word ere you depart? If you should have an opportunity," she continued, advancing

close up to me, and speaking in a voice so deep and low that her words were but just audible—and yet they were filled with the melody of an exquisite pathos; "if you should have an opportunity, tell *him* that you have seen me—that his image has never been absent from my mind—that day and night have I thought of him—and I would lay down my life at the expiration of one hour if during that hour we could be as we were wont. Oh! that this were permitted me! One hour—one hour of love and bliss with him—and I should die content! But no—no: you must not tell him what I say—you must not!"

Now the tears rained down her cheeks, and her voice was lost in sobs. She clasped her hands with all the mute eloquence of utter despair; then she fell back upon a seat, covered her face with those thin but white and exquisitely-modelled hands, and gave way to an outburst of anguish so violent that I dared not leave her.

"Oh! tranquillize yourself, Miss Temple—compose yourself, I beseech you!" was my earnest and imploring adjuration.

"Tranquillize myself!" she exclaimed. "What, when all the joys of my life have withered and perished like evanescent flowers? Good heaven, when I think of it all," she cried passionately, and with a strange wild look, "it nearly drives me mad. Yet with a word—a single word——no, no—never, never! I must endure it all until the end. Death will soon release me from my sufferings: for it is impossible that I can live on thus much longer. And yet it is a sad and a cruel thing to contemplate that even in my very grave shall I be dishonoured. Mary Price," she exclaimed, starting up and turning towards me with the strangest vehemence, "there are moments when frenzy fastens on my brain. Do not—do not, I implore you attach any importance to what I have said——I scarcely know indeed what I *have* said——but pray do not catch up any hasty word that may have fallen from my lips and put upon it a construction which——But I am raving even now! Ah, mine is a fearful life—a horrible, horrible destiny!"—and now she wrung her hands in despair.

"I cannot leave you thus," said I, having utterly lost sight of all that was disparaging to her, and thinking of naught but what spoke in her favour—namely, her youth, her beauty, her ineffable anguish. "You have not told me what you purpose to do in respect to these men who are watching in the neighbourhood," I said gently.

"Oh, let them watch on!" she exclaimed, now with a species of strange wild bitterness in her accents. "Will they not watch vainly? Shall he and I meet? No, no. For were we to encounter each other, even by accident, I could not endure the look of scorn—perhaps hatred—which would appear upon those features that were wont to beam only with love and bliss for me——no, I could not endure it—and I should fall at his feet—I should tell him——"

But here again she checked herself abruptly, and remained silent. I still stood hesitating whether to take my immediate departure, or to remain a little longer; for the interview had been rapidly deepening in mysterious interest for me.

"Ah!" she ejaculated, as if her words were an echo of a reminiscence that had struck her, "we were speaking of those men who are watching in the neighbourhood. Well, they must watch on. You say that they are bad and evil characters? No matter—at least so far as I am concerned. Think you that even if I knew they entertained a design upon my life, I would take a single step to frustrate it? No, no—not I. What? my wretched worthless life—a thing which is a burden and an encumbrance to me——and I take any means to save it? No, no—not I indeed!"

I could say no more: I felt that this was the proper time for me to take my leave—and I did so. But as I was passing out of the room, Miss Temple suddenly sprang forward, and catching my hand, wrung it warmly, saying, "Come and see me again. I shall always treat you as a friend. Come soon—promise me that you will come soon?"

I did promise, and then hurried away. Hastily rejoining Mr. Cleveland, whom I found with the children in the spot where I had left them, I saw by his looks that he was most anxious for me to explain what had taken place with Miss Temple; and I could not help thinking that notwithstanding all he had endured on account of her, the love that he had once borne her, was not altogether dead in his heart.

"Let me speed with these children homeward," said I: "for it is already getting late, and Mrs. Antrobus might be angry at my long absence."

"Just one word, Mary—one word!" said Mr. Cleveland earnestly. "Did she——Miss Temple——receive you kindly and with pleasure? did she suspect that you came from me? did she speak of me? But rather I should ask," he added, with a sudden air of dignified reserve, "how fares that poor fallen creature? does she seem contrite and penitent?"

"I now bethink me," said I—but rather in a musing manner to myself than in direct response to his question,—"that throughout our interview, which, as you perceive, has lasted above an hour, not a single word that may properly be termed expressive of penitence came from her lips. Of bitter lamentations, anguished expressions, and the outpourings of despair, there were sufficient, heaven knows!"

"And no word of penitence?" said Mr. Cleveland in a tone of mournful regret. "Surely she cannot be hardened——"

"Hardened? No—that is impossible," I quickly answered: then in a very grave and serious manner, I added, "Mr. Cleveland, there is some mystery about Selina Temple which not even *you* have fathomed. I feel convinced that all the details of her sad history are not known to you. There is in her language and her manner a certain repining against her condition, as if it had not been shaped out by herself. A stranger, to hear her speak, and to behold her looks when she is speaking, would think—supposing him to be totally unacquainted with her history—that she is a victim rather than a criminal. Depend upon it, sir, that I was not altogether wrong when I pitied her and gave her my sympathy!"

"And you pity her now?" he said, evidently much moved. "You sympathize with her still?"

"I do," was my firmly given response: "and henceforth I shall always pity her. These may be strange words coming from my lips: for heaven

knows that I can have no real sympathy with aught savouring of guilt or impurity. But in this instance I cannot help the feeling which inspires me. It is stronger than myself."

"What, in heaven's name, would you have me infer from this strange language of yours?" asked Mr. Cleveland, growing more and more agitated.

"I know not—because I mean nothing. Unless it be that I have the profound conviction in my soul that if Selina Temple's history were known in all its most secret and minutest details, there would be found something to render her less criminal in your eyes than she is at present."

Mr. Cleveland appeared deeply struck by the words I had just uttered; and I felt that I *had* uttered them too in an earnest and impressive manner. I now left him, and hurried onward to the house with the two children, being obliged to carry the younger in my arms, as the poor little thing was very tired and sleepy.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

AN ENCOUNTER.—UNPLEASANT SUSPICIONS.

A WEEK now passed, during which no change took place in the aspect of affairs. The weather had all of a sudden undergone a change; and for several days there was a great deal of rain—so that I was unable to take the children out for their usual exercise. Being during this interval chiefly confined to the nursery, I saw very little of Mr. Cleveland; and he said nothing to me relative to the matter which nevertheless could not have been but uppermost in his mind. Whether the Bulldog and Sawbridge were still watching in the neighbourhood, I had not the slightest means of knowing: but from the conversation which I had overheard between them in the grove, I concluded that they were not at all likely to abandon in a hurry the task which had been assigned them. I must say that during this week I felt in a somewhat nervous and unsettled state: it seemed to me as if I were myself connected with the transactions I have been describing. I also felt as if they must reach a crisis—for I thought that it was impossible Mr. Cleveland would remain apathetic as long as he had cause to believe that every movement of his was secretly watched by spies. In short, I longed for this state of things to cease, and that something should be done either to solve the mystery of those men's presence in the neighbourhood, or else ensure their departure.

It was therefore with a degree of satisfaction and pleasure that I beheld the return of a fine day: for methought that if I went out, Mr. Cleveland would seek an opportunity of speaking to me, and I was anxious to know whether during the week's interval he had been enabled to arrive at any fixed determination how he was to proceed. Having dressed the children, I took them out for a walk; but as the fields were still damp from the heavy rains that had fallen, I was compelled to proceed along the main road. I did not take the direction of Miss Temple's cottage, because I thought that if Mr. Cleveland did follow me, he would not like to repair openly in that vicinage: so I walked in the direction of Winchester. I was not disappointed in my anticipation: for in about a quarter of an hour Mr. Cleveland overtook me. Scarcely however had he thus joined me—and before a single word had passed between us, a tall gentleman, with ample whiskers, glossy mustaches, and an imperial—in fact, with all the lower part of his face pretty well embedded in hair, emerged hastily from a lane which branched off from the road at right angles. I must observe that there was a very high hedge in this particular spot, and that therefore the individual could not possibly have seen us until he had turned the angle of the hedge and thus ran as it were completely up against us. The recognition between himself and Mrs. Antrobus's nephew was immediate; and simultaneously did they ejaculate each other's name.

"Mr. Cleveland!"

"Captain Tollemache!"

I started at the mention of this name, so intimately connected as it was with Selina Temple's history: but what immediately followed took place so hastily that I had little opportunity to take much notice of the Captain's personal appearance. It however struck me that he was as he had been described to me—a remarkably handsome man—judging from as much of his countenance as the quantity of beard he wore left visible. He was very finely made, and seemed to be handsomely dressed.

"Yes!" exclaimed Cleveland, with mingled indignation and bitterness: "it is I, whose happiness was wrecked through you!"

Captain Tollemache made no reply, but turned abruptly on his heel, and was walking away, when Arthur Cleveland sprang after him: and catching him by the arm, exclaimed, "Villain, you shall not escape me thus! The day of reckoning is come. Perhaps I should have sought it long ago!"

"As you please, sir," said Captain Tollemache haughtily, as he drew his fine form up to the full of its military-looking stateliness,—"as you please, sir: and perhaps the sooner the better."

"But a friend——pistols——whom can I apply to?" suddenly ejaculated Cleveland—involuntarily, no doubt, in the bewilderment of the moment.

"No, no, sir!" I almost shrieked forth, terrified at the idea of a duel: for I knew that Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus would be alarmed out of their wits if their nephew's proceeding should reach their ears.

"Mary Price," said Mr. Cleveland, hurriedly turning away from Captain Tollemache and accosting me: "I beseech you to exercise becoming fortitude. The challenge is given and accepted. As a man of honour I cannot retreat, even if I wished: but I do not wish. I enjoin you to say nothing at home of what is now taking place here. Remember, it is a solemn injunction which I thus give you! It will be sufficient for my worthy relatives to hear of it when it is over, whichever way it may terminate. You will spare them all suspense by keeping the secret—will you not, Mary? Promise me this much!"

These words were uttered with vehement rapidity, and in a low voice aside to me; so that Captain Tollemache did not overhear them: but he stood at a short distance with his arms folded haughtily upon his chest and his back half turned towards us.

"But is this duel absolutely necessary, Mr. Cleveland?" I asked, in mingled confusion and trepidation.

"Yes—absolutely necessary," was his firm re-

sponse. "For heaven's sake, Mary, fulfil my injunction!"

"I will, I will," I answered, scarcely knowing what I did say.

"Mr. Cleveland," now observed Captain Tollemache, "there are not wanting persons whom we both know in Winchester, to act as our seconds. You can hear of me within an hour at——"

He named some hotel—I forget now what it was: in fact, I do not think I caught it at the time—for all my ideas were whirling in confusion, and a dizziness appeared to be coming over me. I however promptly recovered myself; and then I beheld Mr. Cleveland hurrying along the road towards Winchester, and Captain Tollemache proceding with equal rapidity up the lane whence he had ere now emerged, and which was a short cut into the city. I could do nothing to stop the progress of this duel: I even felt that I had been drawn into a pledge not to betray to my master and mistress what was about to take place; and I saw that it was Mr. Cleveland's secret which I must keep inviolable, and not mine which I could reveal if I chose. Moreover, I felt persuaded that even if I raised an alarm at the house, there would not be time for any useful and effectual interference ere the hostile meeting had probably taken place; and under these circumstances I perceived no utility in filling my master and mistress with the direst alarms and making them endure the torture of suspense. I therefore decided upon keeping the promise which had been exacted from me and placing a seal upon my lips.

I turned and retraced my way with the children towards the house: but while proceeding along, I thought to myself that the transactions which had recently occupied my attention down in this part of the world, had now reached a juncture from which something important would be evolved. Such was the presentiment that arose in my mind, as it gradually recovered its poise from the agitation into which it had been thrown. But was it not strange that Captain Tollemache should be in the neighbourhood at the same time as Mr. Cleveland? and was it not natural to connect his presence there with that of the spies who had been employed to watch that gentleman's and Miss Temple's movements? I now felt assured that Captain Tollemache *was* the hitherto unknown employer of the Bulldog and Sawbridge: but still I was as far off as ever from being enabled to conjecture what could be the motive of instituting this watch at all. However, it is useless now to record all the various speculations that entered my head at the time, seeing that none of them turned out to be correct, and that I had not the slightest forecasting of the strange and unparalleled torrent of incidents now about to ensue.

On re-entering the house, I was about to take the children as usual up into the nursery, when Mrs. Antrobus happening to meet us in the hall, bade me bring them into the parlour. This I did; and as she and her husband seemed inclined to keep them there for a little while, I withdrew and went up to the nursery alone. In about a quarter of an hour the parlour-maid came up with the children, and said, "Mary, missus wants to speak to you for a minute. I will take care of the little ones till you come up."

It now struck me all in a moment that the little boy, who was a shrewd, sharp, intelligent child, had been saying something to make Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus wish to question me. Not that he was a mischief-making child: on the contrary, he was a very amiable and sweet-tempered little fellow—so that if he had really said anything, I knew it could only have been in juvenile innocence and artlessness. I must candidly confess that it was with a beating heart and almost with a feeling as if I had been doing something wrong, that I entered the parlour where Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus were seated; and the moment I stood in their presence I was struck with the solemn gravity of their looks.

"Shut the door, Mary," said Mrs. Antrobus: "there may be a draught, and the atmosphere is still damp after the heavy rains. And now come near, if you please. I hope that you will be able to give me satisfactory answers to the questions I am about to put to you. Mr. Antrobus, my dear, you have blown your nose three times during the last minute. I have watched you—and I am very much afraid that you have caught cold."

"No, my dear—no," responded the old gentleman. "I was only sorry that we should be compelled to put to Mary Price those questions which as in duty bound we are about to ask her."

Under any other circumstances how prompt would have been my assurance that nothing could be put to me in the shape of interrogatory that I should not be able to answer at once and most satisfactorily: but I could not give this assurance *now*—and therefore I stood mute, perhaps almost trembling, and I dare say, looking very much like a guilty thing: for the knowledge of a secret which one is pledged not to impart, places one when questioned in this disagreeable and suspicious predicament.

"Now, Mary," resumed Mrs. Antrobus, "we have hitherto believed you to be a young person of the strictest probity and truthfulness; and such do we hope to find you now. We have learnt within the last quarter of an hour——I need scarcely tell you from whose lips——that you have on more than one occasion met Mr. Cleveland out walking. Of course it is natural enough for him to stop and caress the children if he meets you out with them; but from what we have understood, he on one occasion sat with you for a long, long time upon the grass, and on another occasion he met you elsewhere and remained with the children while you were absent for a long time;—and lastly he just now met you again in the road, or rather overtook you——But, dear me! Mr. A., I do believe there's a draught from that window. Some of the list must be off. We must send for Scroggins the carpenter to look to it."

"Well, I did think I had a pain in my ear," said Mr. Antrobus.

"An onion-poultice to-night, my dear old soul."

"Very good, my dear: but a bason of gruel for yourself by way of precaution. And now, Mary," continued my master, "you have heard all that Mrs. A. has said, and I hope you are prepared to give proper explanations. Young men *will* be young men; although I must candidly confess that I should be very much astonished to hear that Arthur Cleveland of all persons in the world could take it into his head to flirt with a young person in

the service of his relatives. Indeed, there are many reasons," he added, with a significant look at his wife, evidently alluding to the unfortunate affair of Selina Temple, "which are but too well calculated to surprise his aunt and myself."

I can scarcely explain to the reader the emotions with which I listened to this address. I felt indignant, yet could not give vent to my indignation: I longed to explain, yet dared not give explanations. The state of my mind being reflected in my countenance, naturally made me appear full of confusion and trouble; so that I looked very much like a guilty thing. As my master and mistress surveyed me, their own countenances became indicative of distress: for they beheld in my manner the confirmation of all their worst suspicions.

"Are we really to understand, then," said Mrs. Antrobus, "that Mr. Cleveland has dared conduct himself with thoughtlessness and impropriety towards you, and that you have not resented his behaviour as you ought?"

"Good heavens—no, ma'am!" I exclaimed: "you are to think nothing of the sort."

"But is it true that he has met you when you were walking out?"

"Perfectly true, ma'am."

"That he has sat down on the grass and talked to you for a long time?"

"Yes—I do not attempt to deny it."

"And what did he talk about?"

I made no answer. I did not choose to tell an untruth—and I could not of course give the proper explanations.

"Mary," said Mrs. Antrobus, now speaking still more seriously than even she had been doing, "I am very sorry indeed at what has occurred. I am truly distressed—I had such a much higher opinion of you, and likewise of my nephew. I do not wish to make any words in the house, or expose you before the other servants: but for your own sake you will see the necessity of leaving my service with the least possible delay."

I was cruelly distressed at hearing my kind old mistress talking to me in this strain. It shocked me to continue even for another minute under the weight of the suspicions which circumstances had attached to me: my heart swelled almost to bursting—I felt a suffocating sensation in the throat, and the tears filled my eyes. Heavens! at that very moment perhaps, while his uncle and aunt were thinking ill of him as well as of myself, was Mr. Cleveland's life endangered in the duel which he had provoked. Or even worse than that—he might already be no more! I felt for an instant inclined to throw myself at the feet of my mistress and tell her all I knew: but remembering my promise to Mr. Cleveland—or at all events, what he had construed into a promise and which I considered myself equally bound to abide by—I held my peace.

"I have nothing more to say to you, Mary," resumed Mrs. Antrobus, in whose accents and looks there was an evident compassion mingling with her feeling of annoyance. "Your own good sense must tell you that I cannot act in any other manner than I am doing."

"Madam," I said, "I feel all the justice of your observation—but——but——"

I was about to ask her to suspend her judgment: but it instantaneously occurred to me that if I did it would only lead to questions against which I should have to fence in order to avoid giving direct answers; and into this kind of prevarication I did not choose to be driven. I therefore thought it better to labour under an injurious suspicion for an hour or two, than stand the chance of making matters worse. I accordingly quitted the room somewhat abruptly, and hastened up into the nursery, where I gave vent to my feelings in tears. The little children, who were very fond of me, came and looked up sorrowfully in my face; and the boy said, "Don't cry, Mary—don't cry."

Poor little fellow! he had been the author of my present vexation, but with no wilful intent: and so far from exhibiting any ill-feeling towards him, I caressed him for the manner in which he now spoke to me.

"After all," I said to myself, "the matter will be cleared up presently: for if Mr. Cleveland should fall—which heaven forbid—in this duel, I must at once reveal everything I know; and if on the other hand he comes home safe, he will not lose a minute in justifying me to his relatives as soon as he hears of what has taken place."

A couple of hours passed, during which I suffered no small degree of suspense. I pictured to myself all the anguish which would be experienced by Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus if Arthur Cleveland should be killed or wounded in the duel. As time wore on and he did not return, I could not help apprehending the worst; and at length my nervous excitement arose to such a pitch that I was on the point of hastening down to the parlour and telling my master and mistress everything, so that they might send out and search or make inquiries for Mr. Cleveland. But at that moment I heard the sounds of several voices in the road; and hastening to the window, I was horror-stricken on beholding half-a-dozen men bearing amongst them a person stretched upon what appeared to be a litter. Good heavens! my worst fears were confirmed—and Mr. Cleveland was either dead or seriously wounded. My first impulse was to rush from the room and ascertain the precise extent of the evil: but I dared not leave the children alone;—and therefore, not pausing to reflect what suspicious construction might be put upon my anxiety on Mr. Cleveland's behalf, I snatched up the little girl in my arms, took the boy by the hand, and hurried with them down stairs. There I found terror and alarm prevailing. The servants were already rushing across the garden to meet the bearers of the litter; while Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus were just emerging from the parlour in fearful consternation.

"Oh! what has happened? what has happened?" they exclaimed. "Is our poor Arthur dead?"—and they precipitated themselves down the front-door steps into the garden.

Mr. Cleveland was not however dead, nor even insensible: he had received a dangerous wound, which the medical man who accompanied the mournful *cortege*, at once assured Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus not to be mortal. It was speedily understood that Arthur Cleveland had been fighting a duel, in which he had received this hurt. There was however too much confusion, excitement, and grief for immediate explanations, the great object being to convey the wounded gentleman up to his chamber. I have already said that he was perfectly

sensible; and he implored his afflicted relatives not to abandon themselves to grief on his account.

"Oh, Arthur!" said Mrs. Antrobus, clasping her hands in deep anguish, "what have you been doing?"

At this moment Mr. Cleveland caught sight of me; and fixing his eyes upon me, he said in reply to his aunt's question, "Mary Price will tell you everything."

These words caused general surprise; and for an instant every look was thrown upon me. But, as I just now said, this was not the moment for explanations; and we all did our best to help the bearers of the litter in getting the wounded gentleman to his chamber. When this was done Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus and the doctor alone remained with him.

The men who had borne Mr. Cleveland to the house were of the labouring-class. They had been at the time employed working in the fields near the spot where the duel had taken place. All they knew was that being suddenly startled by pistol-shots, they hurried in the direction thereof, and found Mr. Cleveland lying stretched upon the grass, with Dr. Robertson (which was the name of the medical man) bending over him and examining the wound he had received. Three gentlemen were hurrying away from the scene of the duel; and these were no doubt the other principal with the two seconds who had officiated on the occasion. A mattrass was promptly procured from the nearest cottage: this was placed upon a hurdle; and a litter being thus formed, the wounded man was borne upon it to the house in the manner already described.

Such was the account given by the labourers to myself and the other servants after Mr. Cleveland had been conveyed to his chamber. The cook immediately set the contents of her larder before the working-men; and by the time they had finished regaling themselves, Mr. Antrobus came down into the kitchen to remunerate them all liberally for their trouble. He repeated the assurance already given by Dr. Robertson, and which a more careful scrutiny of the wound had since corroborated—that though dangerous, it was not mortal.

The labourers took their departure; and Mr. Antrobus, turning with the kindest and most benevolent look towards me, said, "Now, Mary, my dear girl, I want to have a few minutes' private conversation with you. Leave the children in the care of the other servants, and come with me to the parlour."

In one respect a considerable weight was now lifted from my mind: for I saw that the injurious suspicions which had previously existed against me had been dispelled. I followed my master to the parlour; and the moment we were alone together, he took my hand, saying, "You must forgive me and Mrs. Antrobus for what took place just now. Enough has fallen from Mr. Cleveland's lips to convince us that our suspicions were altogether unfounded; and I must say that you are a very generous-hearted girl to have remained and smarted under them, rather than be guilty of a breach of confidence towards Mr. Cleveland."

"I knew very well, sir," was my answer, "that circumstances would soon tend to disabuse your mind of those suspicions. But does Mr. Cleveland say that I am now at perfect liberty to tell you all I know?"

"It is for that purpose we are here together at this moment. He says that there is no necessity to maintain any farther reserve or secrecy—indeed, that under present circumstances it would be wrong to do so."

I accordingly proceeded to make Mr. Antrobus acquainted with those particulars which are already well known to the reader—how I had overheard the conversation of the two men in the grove—how I had communicated the particulars of their discourse to Mr. Cleveland—how we had both agreed to keep the matter secret for fear of creating alarm in the house—how I had called at his request upon Selina Temple—and how that morning Mr. Cleveland had encountered Captain Tollemache and had provoked him to a duel.

Mr. Antrobus listened in silent astonishment to all these particulars; and when I ceased speaking, he said, after a few minutes' profound reflection, "Then there is every reason to suppose that the two men to whom you have alluded were employed by this same villain Tollemache?"

"Such is the inference to be drawn from their coincidental presence in the neighbourhood," was my response. "But perhaps Mr. Cleveland told you, sir, whether anything of importance took place between him and the Captain, besides the distressing incident of the duel?"

"It appears that nothing of the kind did take place," answered Mr. Antrobus. "Cleveland was wounded at the first shot; and so soon as Dr. Robertson had hastily examined the wound and pronounced it not to be mortal, the Captain and the two seconds fled, doubtless afraid of the consequences."

"And will not Dr. Robertson himself be liable to a collision with the law?" I asked.

"In these cases the medical men are seldom interfered with," replied Mr. Antrobus. "They are evidently indispensable in such unfortunate affairs; and if they were arrested and punished, the consequence would be that they would decline attending at all."

Mr. Antrobus then proceeded to inform me that the bullet had entered the flesh of Mr. Cleveland's right shoulder—that it had broken the collar-bone, and had lodged in that part—but that there was every prospect of Dr. Robertson being able to extract it soon.

"And with regard to these two men who are keeping watch in the neighbourhood," said I: "what do you purpose to do in the matter?"

"I have not yet had time to think," answered Mr. Antrobus. "Perhaps, now that their employer has fled, they will likewise take their departure. But we shall see."

Here this interview with Mr. Antrobus ended; and while he hastened up to Mr. Cleveland's chamber, I repaired to the kitchen to resume my charge of the children. The servants naturally regarded me with a great deal of curiosity; as from the words that Mr. Cleveland had uttered on being brought into the house, as well as from my long interview with Mr. Antrobus, they conjectured that I was acquainted with some important secrets. But they did not ask me any questions; and of course I did not volunteer explanations. Taking the children up

into the nursery, I was glad to be again in my own quarters, so as to have an opportunity of reflecting upon all that had occurred.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

ALARMING SYMPTOMS.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening of that same eventful day, that Mrs. Antrobus came up to the nursery, and putting a note into my hand, said, "My dear Mary, this has just been delivered at the house. The gardener took it in. A labouring man brought it, and instantaneously hurried away without saying a word. In consequence of all you told Mr. A. this afternoon, and which he has of course repeated to me, I have no difficulty in guessing from whom the letter comes. But you will open it and see."

My mistress spoke in the kindest and even most affectionate manner, evidently to make amends for the little scene which had taken place between us in the morning. I hastened to open the note, the address of which was written in a beautiful female hand; and I also, even before I saw the signature, at once suspected from whom it came. Nor was I mistaken: it was from Selina Temple, and its contents ran as follow:—

"My dear friend,

"For such I hope you will permit me to call you. I do beseech and implore that you will contrive to come and see me this evening, if only for a few minutes! I am in a state of dreadful nervous excitement; and there are moments when I feel as if I should go raving mad. In such a mood I am fearful of committing some desperate folly—even to the rashness and impropriety of visiting you where you are. Pray endeavour to come—Oh, do come!

"SELINA TEMPLE."

Having perused this note, I handed it to my mistress, who read it with attention. She then asked my permission to show it to her husband, to which I of course gave my assent. She accordingly quitted the room for the purpose; but returned in a few minutes, and said, "Mr. A. is of the same opinion as myself; which is that you should comply with the request contained in this note. Poor erring creature! her wickedness has been great, but her punishment has been almost commensurate; and there is such a thing as making punishment a persecution. Such an appeal as this ought not to be neglected. You must go therefore, Mary——that is to say, if you yourself have no objection?"

"How can I, my dear madam?" I exclaimed. "It appears to be almost a duty—and at least an act of charity—to comply with a request so earnestly urged. Does Mr. Cleveland know that this letter has been sent?"

"Oh, no!" replied Mrs. Antrobus: "for Dr. Robertson has given the most positive orders that all causes of excitement are to be guarded against as much as possible. Indeed," she added in a mournful voice, "Arthur is not so well this evening: the wound is more inflamed, and the bullet is not yet extracted. He is sleeping, but appears uneasy and restless. I showed the note to Dr. Robertson——"

"You did, madam?" I exclaimed, in some degree of astonishment: for I did not know that the medical man had been admitted as a confidant in all that had taken place.

"Yes, to be sure!" she responded: "for the doctor is himself deeply interested in the whole proceeding. Perhaps however you are not aware," she added, seeing that I still looked surprised, "that Dr. Robertson was the gentleman called in two years ago, when the sad exposure took place——"

"Indeed! the name of the medical man had not been mentioned to me before. Was it Mr. Cleveland or Captain Tollemache who engaged him to be present at the duel?"

"It was Captain Tollemache, I believe," replied Mrs. Antrobus. "The doctor, on reading the note just now, earnestly recommended that you should lose no time in visiting the unhappy young woman who so much desires to see you."

"I will go at once," said I: and having hastily put on my bonnet and shawl, I issued forth on my way to the cottage. I proceeded along the main road, so as to avoid the risk of encountering the Bulldog or Sawbridge, in case they should be still watching in the fields. In little more than a quarter of an hour—for I walked very quickly—I reached the cottage. The door was immediately opened by Nancy, whose first words, spoken in a hurried whisper, were, "How is Mr. Cleveland? is he in danger?" I at once assured her that the injury he had received was not mortal and hopes were entertained of his recovery. Her countenance brightened up somewhat; and then she at once introduced me to the little parlour, where I found Selina Temple.

"Oh! I thank you—thank you most sincerely for this kindness!" exclaimed the young lady, starting from her seat and taking both my hands, which she pressed warmly. "You know not the agonies of suspense I have endured! But tell me all—everything—even the worst—if the worst be to tell! Is Arthur—I mean Mr. Cleveland——"

I at once gave Miss Temple the same assurance I had already given her servant in the passage.

"Oh, then he will be saved! he will be saved!" exclaimed Selina, in accents of exultant hopefulness. "Good heavens, what conflicting reports have reached my ears! I thought I should have gone mad—and it was almost in a state bordering upon frenzy that I penned that note to you. But tell me, Mary, is it indeed true that Dr. Robertson is in attendance upon him?"

"It is true, Miss Temple," I answered.

She sat down and fell into a profound reverie. Two or three minutes thus elapsed during which she appeared to have forgotten my presence altogether: but suddenly raising her eyes towards me, she said, "Is it likewise true that he—Captain Tollemache"—and she seemed to shudder at the bare mention of the name—"fled precipitately immediately after the encounter?"

"That is likewise true," I replied.

"And of course it has struck you, Mary," at once resumed the young lady, "that *he* must have been the employer of those two men——Oh! I understand it all—I understand it all—there is no longer any uncertainty upon the point. From the very first I had my suspicions!"

She suddenly stopped short and again yielded herself up to her own thoughts. Again also was it with a sudden start—as if she were now the victim of nervous impulses—that she exclaimed, "Did Captain Tollemache hold any conversation with Arthur Cleveland? did much discourse pass between them? But I presume, from what I have heard, that nothing was said of any consequence after the encounter—no explanations of any kind were given?"

"Nothing," I replied: and then I thought that Miss Temple herself was about to volunteer some explanations of her own—for that there were important secrets trembling upon her tongue I felt convinced. She had the appearance of one upon whose heart lay a weight of which she could disburden herself if she chose, but she was afraid to do so. More than ever did I feel assured that there was a strange mystery enveloping this singular creature—a mystery holding her in toils and meshes from which some impulsive power urged her to emancipate herself, but in the thraldom of which was she held fast bound by imperious circumstances of some totally opposite nature.

"Mary Price," she said, "again do I thank you for this visit. Before you came I thought that I had a thousand things to tell you: but now that you are here, I feel myself incapable of saying anything. Wherefore do you gaze upon me in this strange manner?"

"Perhaps I should offend if I told you," was my answer.

"No, no—you are incapable of giving me offence!" she quickly rejoined. "Tell me—there is something in your mind—you must speak it out frankly and candidly——"

"Miss Temple," I replied, "that there is some extraordinary mystery surrounding you with its tremendous influence,—enveloping you as it were in a dark cloud—I feel convinced. That it would be a relief for you to escape from this thraldom, I am likewise certain——"

"God knows it would!" she exclaimed fervently:

and she clasped her hands together. "But no—I dare not!"

"You dare anything to rescue yourself."

"No, no!" she repeated hysterically, now wringing the hands which an instant before had been clasped together: "you know not what you say. But listen," she instantaneously added, suddenly becoming more composed; "and bear in mind what I am about to say. If Arthur Cleveland's injury should appear to take an evil turn,—which God in his mercy forbid!—if danger should menace him ——you understand me—I cannot bring my mind to be more explicit——but in case of emergency, you promise me that you will come hither—you will fly to me—you will acquaint me with the sad truth —so that I may at least see him in his last moments —that he may not go out of the world without hearing from my lips——But I can say no more—you understand me fully——"

"I do, Miss Temple," was my answer; "and if I be permitted, I promise to comply with your request."

"Permitted!" she exclaimed with hysterical petulance. "Good heavens! you must not wait for permission—you must do it of your own accord—Oh! you know not how much depends upon the fulfilment of your promise! For were he to pass out of this life without having heard from my lips the revelation of the tremendous secret which lies like a weight of lead upon my heart, I should become frenzied—it would make me a maniac—and I should die raving in a madhouse! Now, Mary, do you understand how important it is that you should give me the promise I require—but give it without reserve, without condition——"

"I will do so, Miss Temple," said I, feeling assured that I could take this much upon myself.

"My life may not be a long one," she said in a profoundly mournful tone, "but my gratitude will be your's until the end. And now you must leave me: for I have need of solitude to commune with myself. But remember your promise! Even if it be the middle of the night you must come——Oh! you must come!"

"I would not for worlds deceive you," was my answer, "after all that you have said."

She took my hand and pressed it cordially. I then departed; and hurrying from the house so as to avoid the chance of being questioned by Nancy, made the best of my way homeward. On my arrival I was at once desired by the housemaid to proceed to the parlour; and on entering that room, I found my master and Dr. Robertson seated together.

"Wait a moment till your mistress comes down," said Mr. Antrobus.

In a minute or two the worthy old lady made her appearance; and I then described everything which had taken place between Selina Temple and myself. I could not help noticing that Dr. Robertson listened with a peculiar and absorbing interest: he seemed to hang upon every word I spoke; and as I recited the impassioned ejaculations to which Miss Temple had given utterance, methought I read in his looks that he was not altogether at a loss to comprehend their meaning. Indeed I felt convinced that the medical man knew more than it was generally suspected he did, and that he could make a revelation if he chose.

"Is not all this singular, doctor?" asked Mrs. Antrobus, when I had finished my narrative.

"Very singular, madam," he replied, but still I thought with a certain dryness of tone as if the affair was by no means singular to *him*.

"There is evidently a secret somewhere," continued Mrs. Antrobus; "and you, doctor, who were called in at the time the sad affair took place, might perhaps, if you ransacked your memory, discover some clue to the reading of it."

"I think I had better go up to see how my patient gets on," said Dr. Robertson; and he thereupon quitted the room somewhat abruptly.

"How is Mr. Cleveland now?" I asked.

"There is not any improvement, I am sorry to say," replied Mrs. Antrobus. "Dr. Robertson intends to remain here all night."

"I have told you, ma'am, the promise which I gave Miss Temple: I hope you do not disapprove of my proceeding in that respect?"

"Not in the least, Mary. On the contrary, you shall keep it if the sad necessity arises. But God forbid that it should be so!"—and the poor old lady began to weep.

After a little more conversation I quitted the parlour and returned to my quarters.

The night passed; and the moment I rose in the morning I descended to inquire concerning Mr. Cleveland. Very gently did I knock at the patient's door: Mrs. Antrobus herself came out—and it was easy to perceive by her disordered dress that she had not been to bed at all. She shook her head mournfully, and the tears trickled down her cheeks. I began to grow frightened; and yet I thought that if there were any positive danger, she would have called me so that I might fulfil the promise I had made to Selina Temple.

"He has passed a bad night, and for some time was delirious," said Mrs. Antrobus. "But Dr. Robertson assured me there was no imminent peril. He is now sleeping more tranquilly. But——" and the old lady shook her head mournfully. "In his delirium," she went on to say, "he was continually calling for her whose image is evidently uppermost in his mind. I fear me, Mary——"

She stopped short and wiped her eyes. She was going to say something more: but her feelings suffocated her, and she retreated into the chamber, while I returned to the nursery, sadly apprehensive that the worst would ensue.

In the course of the day Dr. Robertson was enabled to extract the bullet: but this operation was not followed by more favourable signs. It was indeed a melancholy time for us all at the house; and every one seemed to feel deeply the calamity which had occurred. Towards evening I thought that it would be but kind and proper to let Miss Temple know that the bullet had been removed; and I accordingly gave a hint to this effect to Mrs. Antrobus. My purpose was to pen a line or two to Miss Temple: but the good lady recommended me to pay a visit to the cottage.

"For," said she, "after the deep interest which the unhappy girl has taken in my nephew's condition, I do not wish to treat her with unnecessary harshness. She is either profoundly penitent; or else there is some mystery which, if revealed, would go far perhaps to extenuate the seeming wickedness of her conduct. Heaven knows! At

all events we will treat her with as much consideration as under circumstances she can expect."

It being now seven o'clock in the evening, and therefore close upon the children's bed-time, I did not take them with me but repaired alone to the cottage. I was immediately admitted; and Miss Temple advanced to meet me with a look of apprehension—for her first thought naturally was that I had come to summon her to a death-bed. I therefore hastened to reassure her on that head; and unspeakable was the relief which she experienced. I told her that the bullet had been extracted; but I did not conceal from her the fact that Mr. Cleveland's condition was such as to inspire much misgiving. She wept bitterly—she wrung her hands—and after many lamentations, suddenly exclaimed, "I must go to him! I must go to him! I can endure this no longer! No—happen what will, I must go to him!"

Before I had time to utter a word in reply, a travelling-carriage dashed up to the garden gate; and Selina, glancing forth through the window, cried, "My sister!" Then, as if struck by some extraordinary sensation, she sank back upon the sofa, and neither moved nor spoke, but gazed with a singularly wild and vacant look in the direction of the equipage which had just arrived.

A tall livery-servant, leaping down from the box, opened the door of the vehicle, and a lady descended. Hurriedly did she traverse the little garden and approach the cottage. Nancy, who had seen the carriage stop, hastened to open the front door: for I heard her steps tripping rapidly along the passage—and I heard the door also open.

"My sister—Miss Temple—is she at home?" asked Lady Davenant: and it struck me that she spoke in a voice more or less agitated.

"I think that I had better retire, Miss Temple," said I, moving towards the door: but Selina answered me not—she still sat motionless and silent upon the sofa, like one petrified by the strangest and most powerful emotions, or as if reduced by utter bewilderment and consternation to that statue-like rigidity. The parlour-door opened hastily, and Lady Davenant rushed in. Yes: she literally rushed into the parlour—but stopped suddenly on finding herself face to face with a stranger in the person of myself, instead of her sister. A quick glance around, however, showed her Selina seated upon the sofa: and the next instant the sisters were folded in each other's arms. Then I hurriedly quitted the room, closing the door behind me.

Nancy was in the passage, and she asked me to step into the kitchen and take some refreshment with herself and Mrs. Danby (Miss Temple's housekeeper and general servant). But it was now dusk, and I was anxious to return home. I accordingly excused myself, and hastened away. I could not help thinking as I sped along the road, that the sudden and evidently unexpected arrival of Lady Davenant was in some way connected with the incidents then progressing; and yet I knew not how to connect her presence therewith. I may observe that from the little I saw of her—scarcely more than a hurried glimpse—she fully justified the description which Mr. Cleveland had given of her,—being of tall figure, finely made, slightly inclining to stoutness, but still not to a degree to mar the symmetry of her shape. She was evidently much agitated at the moment she entered the parlour: but that might have been, methought, at the circumstance of thus re-visiting the home of her girlhood after an absence of two years—re-visiting it also to see that sister whose sorrows were so profound!

Such were my reflections as I retraced my way homeward. On reaching the house I at once proceeded to the parlour, where I found my master alone. I communicated to him Lady Davenant's arrival; and while I was yet speaking, Dr. Robertson entered the room. Upon learning the intelligence which I had just imparted to Mr. Antrobus, the medical man was evidently stricken with amazement: and he said—no doubt involuntarily—"This is most extraordinary! It cannot be a coincidence!"

"Doctor," observed Mr. Antrobus, who had been eyeing him attentively, "I cannot help thinking that you know more than you choose to admit!" But the medical man made no reply, and again quitted the room as abruptly as he had done on the preceding evening.

I ascended to the nursery, wondering what could be the cause of Dr. Robertson's singular behaviour, unless it were that he was really the depositor of some secret which he dared not reveal, and therefore studiously avoided placing himself in a position to be inconveniently catechised.

Before I retired to rest I made inquiries respecting Mr. Cleveland, and was much grieved to learn that the symptoms were even less favourable than in the afternoon, and that Dr. Robertson entertained some apprehension respecting the night which the invalid was about to pass. I had a presentiment that I should be called up ere many hours elapsed: I even hesitated whether I should go to bed—but I decided upon doing so, placing however my clothes in readiness in case of being summoned. It was a troubled and restless kind of sleep that fell upon my eyes. I was haunted by evil dreams, in which the images of the Bulldog and Sawbridge, Captain Tollemache, Lady Davenant, Dr. Robertson, and Selina Temple, all seemed mingling strangely and fancifully: and at length I imagined—still under the influence of a dream—that the Bulldog was knocking at the nursery-door and commanding me to give him admittance. I started up, the perspiration standing cold and clammy upon my forehead, and my whole frame quivering with terror. The knocking at the door was repeated—and my first impulse was to shriek out in affright: but the next moment a mild and well-known voice said mournfully and softly, "Mary, are you awake?"

It was my mistress who spoke—and I knew for what she came. Springing from the couch, I hastened to unlock the door; and Mrs. Antrobus appeared with a light. Her countenance was haggard and careworn—the tears were trickling down her cheeks—and she trembled so that she could scarcely hold the candle.

"Mary," she said, entering the room, "I am afraid, my dear girl, that circumstances demand the fulfilment of the promise you made to Miss Temple. Arthur—poor Arthur—is raving in the delirium of fever; and Dr. Robertson is now seriously alarmed. I have noticed that every six or seven hours some change takes place, either temporarily for the better or for the worse; and I fancy that all depends on the period which is to follow this one of delirium.

Poor Arthur!" repeated Mrs. Antrobus, her lips quivering with emotions and her voice almost suffocated with sobs: "he does nothing but call for Selina Temple—and I do really believe that her presence might do him good. At all events—everything considered—she shall be fetched—yes, she shall be fetched."

While Mrs. Antrobus was thus speaking, I had begun to huddle on my clothing. She told me it was between twelve and one o'clock; but as the night was very dark and the road extremely lonely, she would call up the old gardener to accompany me with a lantern. I begged her to do nothing of the sort; for the old man by the slowness of his pace would only delay me, and I could find my way very well without the aid of a lantern. Indeed, at the moment I had no fears of any kind: for even the influence of my troubled dream had passed away, and I thought only of fulfilling the promise I had made to Selina.

"If ever there were a moment when whatsoever secret Miss Temple harbours in her bosom, ought to be revealed, it is *now*," observed Mrs. Antrobus; "and unless I shared in your opinion that there *is* indeed something in the back ground, which if known would go far to present her former conduct in a new light, I would not have sanctioned the promise you made, nor allow you to fulfil it now. But are you really not afraid, Mary, to go by yourself? Mr. A. should accompany you, but that he would catch his death with cold. However, I can go with you, wrapping myself well up——"

"No, dear madam," I continued: "I will set off at once, and alone."

By this time I had finished dressing myself, even to my bonnet and shawl; and issuing from the room, descended the stairs. As I passed by the door of Mr. Cleveland's chamber I heard him raving in his delirium: he was calling forth the name of Selina Temple in the most impassioned manner; and his accents gave an impulse to my speed, for I felt convinced that, as Mrs. Antrobus had said, the presence of her whom he had loved so fondly, and perhaps loved still, would do him good. Hurrying down stairs, I let myself out at the front door—traversed the garden and sped along the road in the direction of the cottage.

CHAPTER LXXX.

SELINA'S SECRET.

In the excitement of the proceeding which I was taking, and in the grief which I experienced in consequence of my poor mistress's affliction and her nephew's calamity, I had totally forgotten the circumstance of Lady Davenant being at her sister's cottage. But now, as I proceeded along the road, it suddenly flashed to my mind; and I began to wonder whether she would throw any obstacle in the way of Selina's fulfilment of her desire to visit the deathbed of her former lover. But this was not the only recollection which sprang up in my brain as I pursued my lonely path in the deep darkness of the night: the images of the Bulldog and Sawbridge recurred to my fancy, and terror seized upon me, making me apprehend some peril. I moved away from the hedgerows which I had at first been skirting, and got into the middle of the road. Fear lent wings to my feet: but ever and anon I kept looking round in the apprehension that I should discern some one close at my heels. All my apprehensions however proved unfounded; and I reached the cottage without any interruption.

To my surprise I beheld a light burning in the parlour; and I therefore concluded that Lady Davenant and her sister had not retired to rest. But perhaps her ladyship was no longer there? perhaps her visit had been but a hurried and a flying one? or perhaps, on the other hand, she was really there, and after their long separation the sisters were sitting up until this late hour, unobservant of the lapse of time, in the absorbing interest of their discourse?

Such were the varied conjectures which passed rapidly through my mind, as I opened the garden-gate and threaded that little enclosure of verdure and of flowers. I knocked gently at the front-door; and almost instantaneously I heard the parlour-door opening inside. Then the front-door itself fell back; and I beheld the object of my visit. She was pale—very, very pale—and appeared as if she had been weeping much and bitterly.

"Heavens, is it you?" she ejaculated, but in a low voice, and her accents seemed as if they were clouded with inward grief. "Oh, I know why you come!"—and clasping her hands in convulsive anguish, she staggered back against the side of the passage.

"Who is it, Selina?" asked a voice from the parlour, and which I instantaneously recognized to be that of Lady Davenant, whom, as the reader will remember, I had heard speak on her arrival at the cottage that evening.

"No one—that is to say, it's nothing," quickly replied Selina, as if instantaneously recalled to herself by her sister's voice; and she put her finger upon her lips to enjoin me to be upon my guard. "I will be with you in a moment," she added in a low whisper.

Then she turned abruptly away, and sped upstairs. Almost at the same instant a shadow darkened the doorway of the parlour whence the light of candles was streaming forth into the passage; and Lady Davenant stood before me. By that same light which now shone fully upon my countenance she evidently recognized me at once; and in a quick voice, she said, "Ah! you are the young woman I saw here before. What do you require now, and at this hour?"

"I had something to say to Miss Temple," was my answer.

Scarcely were the words spoken when Selina came precipitating herself down the stairs, but light as the spirit whose airy speed she seemed to be endowed with. She had her bonnet and shawl on, and looked as if she were filled with an almost frenzied agitation.

"Selina, what does this mean?" exclaimed Lady Davenant, who appeared to be suddenly seized with a fearful anxiety.

"I shall return presently—I am going with this young person here for a few minutes," was Miss Temple's quick and excited response.

"It is impossible, Selina! You cannot go out to-night."

"Gertrude, you shall not rule me thus!" almost screamed forth the frenzied young lady, her cheeks suddenly flushing as she stamped her foot in the excitement of her feelings.

"Ah! do you speak to me so?" exclaimed the elder sister, becoming pale as death, all the grand beauty of her countenance turning into a convulsive ghastliness. "No—it shall not be!"—and seizing Selina by the arm, she dragged her with extraordinary power into the parlour. So sudden was the movement that Selina evidently had not even the time for resistance. The parlour-door was closed violently; and there did I remain on the threshold of the front-door, which continued open. I was confounded at this scene, and knew not how to act. A violent altercation sprang up between the sisters inside the room: but my ear caught not the sense of their words. In a few instants Lady Davenant came forth; and with fury in her looks, she cried, "Begone, young woman—I know who you are! My sister goes not out to-night!"—and she shut the front-door in my face.

Almost simultaneously therewith, I heard the window of the parlour suddenly open, and beheld Selina come bounding forth into the garden. Without waiting for me she darted to the gate, swift as an arrow shot from a bow. The next moment I was speeding after her. The gate was reached—I glanced back, and observed Lady Davenant also springing in what appeared to be frantic precipitation from the open window. I paused not a moment, but ran after Selina Temple, whose light dress I caught sight of at least thirty yards ahead. Several minutes elapsed ere I overtook her; and then she was so exhausted with the efforts she had made and the excitement accompanying them, that she was compelled to stop and cling to my arm for support. I looked back: Lady Davenant was at the moment issuing from the gate.

"Your sister is pursuing us," I said. "Let us speed on."

The announcement seemed to inspire the young lady with new courage and fresh activity; and away we went, coursing along the road like two hunted deer. I heard a voice, hoarse with rage, commanding us to stop: but it only seemed to have the effect of urging my companion to a more frenzied speed. We did not pause again for at least five minutes; and then we both sank breathless and exhausted on a bank by the road-side. For at least another minute neither of us could utter a word; but we sat panting and gasping with painful and desperate efforts to recover the power of respiration. Suddenly the rustling of garments, the sound of footsteps, and likewise the gasping of a breathless throat met our ears: the next instant the form of Lady Davenant came rushing from the depth of gloom—and she sprang towards her sister like an infuriate tigress. But Selina bounded away with the lightness of the fawn: the next moment I was by her side—and again did we leave Gertrude far behind. Oh! what wild excitement was there in that scene! On we sped, as if for life and death. Not a word was spoken between us. For my part I could not speak: my throat was as dry as if I had been swallowing ashes. Again were we compelled to stop to recover breath. We listened with all the keenness of our ears: but no indications of continued pursuit reached us then. In a few moments, however, it was different: and then they were heard again—the quick steps, the rustling silk, and the terribly panting breath!

Away, away again!—again too was our pursuer distanced! And now a glimmering light appeared at the extremity of a length of gloom. It was the place of our destination—the light that shone in Mr. Cleveland's window. A few minutes more, and we reached the garden-gate. No pursuing steps were now heard: through the garden we sped—and more violent than it ought to have been was the knock which I gave at the front-door. Scarcely had the sound ceased when the garden-gate was flung violently open, and our pursuer came madly bounding along the walk. Selina threw her arms round my waist, and clung to me as if resolved not to be torn away by her tigress-like sister. The front-door opened—we sprang across the threshold in a manner that made Mrs. Antrobus, who opened it, shriek out—and I closed it in the face of Lady Davenant.

Selina sank down half-fainting upon the hall-mat, while I threw myself on the foot of the stairs, both of us gasping as if life itself were ebbing away. Mrs. Antrobus naturally conjectured that we had been frightened; and hurrying into the parlour, the kind considerate old lady fetched water and glasses, and gave us each to drink. I had expected to hear a furious knocking at the front door; but nothing of the kind took place—and therefore I concluded that Lady Davenant, finding that her sister's object was accomplished, had not chosen to make any farther attempt to coerce or arrest her.

"Madam," said Miss Temple, so soon as she had partially recovered breath and had risen up painfully from where she had thrown herself, "I never thought that I should cross this threshold again. Believe me—Oh! believe me that I am not what you have long—too long—imagined me to be! But this is a revelation which I must make first of all to him whom it most concerns!"

It would be impossible to describe the sudden thrill of joy which shot through my heart as these words met my ears. They seemed like a proclamation of innocence—and I believed that it was so: but how or in what manner such innocence was to be proved, or how in the face of all known circumstances it could exist at all, I neither knew nor waited to conjecture. The same feeling was evidently shared by worthy Mrs. Antrobus: for in a voice broken with mingled surprise and joy, she said, "Oh! if this is true, Selina, how fondly would I clasp you in my arms!"

"Dear madam, you will know all soon!" quickly responded the young lady: and she glanced impatiently up the staircase.

"I know whither your thoughts are travelling—or rather, where they are fixed. And I have some good news for you——"

"Oh, God be thanked!" murmured Selina, clasping her hands in the fervour of a hopefulness suddenly inspired. And I also comprehended the meaning of my mistress's words, and welcomed them as another source of satisfaction and joy.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Antrobus; "soon after you left, Mary, the fever took a favourable turn—the delirium ceased — and, heaven be praised! Arthur is now sensible. But he knows not as yet that you are coming, Selina——And yet he has

mentioned your name," she added more slowly, "not only in his ravings, but likewise since!"

"Oh, delay not in letting me see him!" exclaimed Miss Temple, still clasping her hands together. "I have made up my mind how to act, and nothing shall deter me from it. But pray, dear madam, let me see him at once——Oh! let me see him!"

"Walk into the parlour with Mary for a few minutes, and I will prepare him:"—having said which, Mrs. Antrobus hastened up-stairs.

We did not move away from the spot where we were standing; for Selina, with a restless impatience to see the object of her adoration, would not quit the vicinage of the stairs leading up to his room. Taking my hand, she said in a deep voice full of grateful emotion, "Mary, how much am I indebted to you for having brought this about! And you will find that after all, I am not unworthy ——But I can say no more now: you shall remain with me while I make the wondrous revelation to Arthur:"—then glancing round towards the front-door, she added, while a visible shudder swept over her frame, "Unhappy Gertrude, what am I about to do?"

Relinquishing my hand, Selina leant against the wall, and for a few moments appeared to reflect profoundly. Perhaps even then—at the last moment—she hesitated whether to do what she had resolved upon; and I guessed what was thus passing in her mind. But suddenly a door up-stairs opened; and Mrs. Antrobus, leaning over the bannisters, said in a gentle voice, "Come up!"

Selina's first impulse was to bound up the stairs fleet and airy as in her fawn-like speed she had ere now bounded along the road: but instantaneously checking herself, she ascended in the gentle and more deliberate manner becoming the house where an invalid lay. I followed her; and it was with a beating heart—for I felt as much true joy on her account as if it were my own case. On reaching the landing, Mrs. Antrobus beckoned me to enter along with them; and we passed into the room where Arthur Cleveland lay.

"My own and only love—I am innocent, I am innocent!" murmured Selina, falling upon her knees by the side of the couch, and by that very act calling heaven as it were to attest the truth of what she proclaimed.

"Innocent, Selina?" said Cleveland, the radiance of an indescribable joy suddenly appearing upon his pale features. "My God, if this were possible——"

"As there is an Almighty above us, I can attest it!" said Dr. Robertson, advancing from the extremity of the room and speaking in a solemn voice.

"Oh! come to my arms, Selina! come to my arms!" exclaimed Cleveland, with a sudden access of power in his voice, as if that joyous but amazing announcement had infused the strong tide of a new life into him: and Selina was the next moment weeping and sobbing upon his breast.

It would be impossible for any power of language to do justice to this scene. Dr. Robertson turned away and applied his handkerchief to his eyes; while worthy old Mrs. Antrobus, crying and sobbing for joy, caught me in her arms and embraced me affectionately, murmuring in a broken voice, "It is you, Mary, who have brought this about! It never would have happened except for you. God Almighty's blessings upon you!"

When released from my mistress's cordial embrace, I sank upon a chair overpowered by my emotions. Was it possible that what I saw passing before me could be otherwise than a dream? was it a reality that Selina Temple—chaste and pure, immaculate and stainless—was clasped in the arms of him who so recently had risked his life in the attempt to punish her supposed seducer? Yes: it was indeed all true—for there was Dr. Robertson to attest it. But who then was the guilty one? to whom belonged the offspring of shame that dwelt at the cottage? The conduct of Lady Davenant this night seemed to give an answer to the question.

When Mrs. Antrobus had done embracing me as above described, she could not resist the temptation of hastening to arouse her husband and communicating the glad tidings of all that had taken place. She was not even deterred from this course by the reflection that it was very prejudicial to awaken an old gentleman from his sleep, especially after he had taken a foot-bath and a treacle-posset to throw him into a perspiration and make him pass a good night's rest. Nor did she even recollect to throw over her shoulders the shawl which had dropped off in the almost frantic delight with which she had strained me to her bosom. It could therefore have been no ordinary state of mind which made the good old lady so utterly regardless of all these things. But something equally marvellous speedily took place. For Mr. Antrobus, in complete defiance of night-air, draughts, dangers of cold, and risks of rheumatism, got up—huddled on some clothing—and, enveloped in his flowered silk dressing-gown, with a white cotton night-cap upon his head, came to the invalid's room to offer his congratulations and embrace Selina.

Happy Selina! she was indeed embraced by the worthy old couple with so cordial a warmth that if she had been their own daughter she could not have experienced a more affectionate endearment. She embraced them too with an equal fervour. Nor was I forgotten by that amiable, excellent, and much-wronged young lady: she folded me in her arms—she lavished upon me the tenderest epithets—she called me her dearest friend—her sister—nay, her more than sister; and she wept, and laughed, and smiled, and sobbed by turns. At length Dr. Robertson was compelled to interfere lest this scene should be prolonged to an extent that might prove injurious to his patient with its excitement; and he good-naturedly but firmly insisted upon the chamber being cleared. Selina earnestly implored that she might sit up in company with the doctor to watch by the bedside of her beloved: but in this she was overruled by the representations made on the part of all of us, including Mr. Cleveland himself. Nor would Dr. Robertson even allow her to give on the present occasion those explanations which were to clear up all mystery in respect to the past; and as her innocence was now thoroughly believed in by all present—corroborated as it had been by the solemn asseveration of the doctor—she yielded also to his recommendation for the postponement of the narrative. To be brief, after having exchanged another fervid embrace with her lover—who was now indeed her lover once again—Selina Temple retired to a chamber appropriated for her occupation.

Little was the sleep that visited my eyes during the rest of that memorable night. I felt the supreme satisfaction of having had a hand in bringing two devoted lovers together again; and I was truly rejoiced. On the following day the mystery relative to the past was cleared up; and I will now make the elucidations known to my readers.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE SELF-DEVOTED.

It appeared that previous to the acquaintance of Lord Davenant with the Temples, Gertrude, the elder sister, conceived a strong passion for the handsome and fascinating Captain Tollemache, who, as previously stated, was a frequent visitor at the picturesque cottage. The Captain himself was not insensible to the charms of Gertrude; nor did he fail to notice the impression which he had made upon her. He was however a poor man: that is to say, he had nothing beyond his pay as an officer in the army—he had contracted numerous debts alike with his tradesmen in London and those in Winchester—and it was therefore most likely that if he married at all, it would only be to some heiress whose fortune would extricate him from his difficulties. Nevertheless, he made love to Gertrude in secret; and such was the violence of her passion that she became his victim. About the same time Lord Davenant arrived in the neighbourhood—was introduced to the Temples—and became strongly enamoured of Gertrude. In due course his attentions grew marked; and then Gertrude consulted with Captain Tollemache how she was to act. He explained to her his own position, assuring her that he dared not think of marriage, unless it were for the purpose of patching up his broken fortunes; and earnestly counselled her to favour the advances of Lord Davenaut. Gertrude had her ambition as well as her other passions and more tender feelings; and perhaps she was not in her heart sorry Captain Tollemache forbore from asserting any claim to her hand. Lord Davenant proposed and was accepted: but shortly afterwards Gertrude found that her weakness with Captain Tollemache was likely to be productive of consequences too well calculated to mar her hopes of ever becoming Lady Davenant. She however kept her own secret; and as time wore on, it continued to escape the suspicion of even those most nearly connected with her. The period for marriage was fixed, the time named being the same as that settled for the union of Arthur Cleveland and Selina Temple. All this while Captain Tollemache continued a visitor at the cottage; and there can be no doubt that he instigated his victim to keep the secret as long as it possibly could be kept, and trust to the chapter of accidents to furnish the means for extricating her from the cruel dilemma in which she was placed. So accomplished a hypocrite was he—and so successfully did Gertrude keep guard over her own words, looks, and actions—that the intimacy between the two escaped all suspicion; and, as it has been stated on a former occasion, Captain Tollemache was regarded in the light of a pleasant and agreeable friend, incapable of entertaining any dishonourable views. How little thought the world that the full measure of dishonour had been accomplished!

In the same way that Arthur Cleveland was compelled to absent himself from the vicinage of Winchester to arrange his affairs prior to the time fixed for his marriage, so was Lord Davenant also compelled to a few months' separation from her on whom he had bestowed his heart. He possessed a large estate in Ireland; and certain circumstances, which need not be here mentioned, forced him to pass a short time amongst his tenantry in the sister-kingdom: for he intended after his marriage to travel on the Continent, and was therefore naturally anxious to leave all his personal affairs in a condition that would guarantee them against suffering in his absence. Thus, for the last three or four months of the period of courtship, Lord Davenant was absent in Ireland; and doubtless this circumstance inspired Gertrude with hopes that she might still manage to conceal her shame altogether from the general knowledge of the world. Her design was to make her mother a confidante of her position, well knowing that her worldly-minded parent would do her best to hush the matter up. But with the natural disinclination to reveal such astounding intelligence, even to a mother of that worldly character, Gertrude procrastinated the period for such revelation until her secret revealed itself. In short, she was suddenly and somewhat prematurely seized with the indications of promptly approaching maternity. Until this moment—the very last—she had most successfully managed to veil her condition even from the keen regards of Mrs. Temple; and therefore when the secret was made known, it burst with the violence of a thunder-shock alike upon the mother and the sister. Dr. Robertson was sent for in the utmost haste; and Gertrude became the mother of a female babe. Earnest and impassioned were the entreaties addressed to the medical man that he would himself undertake to dispose of the infant by sending it to a distance, finding a suitable nurse for it, and concealing all the circumstances of its birth from the female to be thus charged with its keeping. But Dr. Robertson absolutely refused to have anything to do with such a proceeding: at the same time he promised that if those who were most interested in the case could manage to hush it up, he would not betray the secret. Unfortunately however, on his return home, after some hours' absence, he let a few words drop when conversing with his wife which made Mrs. Robertson suspect that something mysterious had occurred at the cottage; and as her husband earnestly enjoined her not to mention that he had been called up in the night and summoned thither in so urgent a manner, her suspicions were naturally strengthened. For some reason or another she entertained a bitter pique against the Temples, either through jealousy at the way in which they were courted and sought after in society, or else from some slight which Gertrude herself had at one time put upon her. She therefore lost no time in gratifying her malignity, or avenging the old standing affront, by propagating the rumour that one of the Miss Temples had become a mother.

The doctor, bitterly indignant and profoundly annoyed at the conduct of his wife, immediately hastened to the cottage and frankly confessed the course which her malignity had taken. All was

then dismay, and affliction, and lamentation within the walls of that cottage. But then was it that Mrs. Temple, suffering her worldly-mindedness to impel her to an act the most diabolical and atrocious, suggested that if one of her two daughters' accepted suitors must be lost, it were better to lose the untitled one and the least wealthy, than the patrician of high rank who possessed thousands where Mr. Cleveland only possessed hundreds. In short, that unprincipled and heartless mother proposed that the weight of shame and infamy should be placed upon the shoulders of the unfortunate Selina, so that Gertrude might still enjoy the prospect of becoming Lady Davenant. For Mrs. Temple had studied Lord Davenant's character well enough to be fully aware that he was too much infatuated with Gertrude to break off the match under the impression that her sister had fallen into the ways of error—and likewise too honourable to visit that sister's supposed error upon Gertrude herself. Upon these calculations was Mrs. Temple's nefarious project based. She propounded it to Gertrude, who, being herself as worldly-minded, as ambitious, and as intensely selfish as her mother, greedily clutched at the hope of saving her own reputation even at the sacrifice of her innocent sister's, and of retaining her own lover although that sister would be doomed to abandon the love of Arthur Cleveland. Then followed a scene which language has no power to describe. Mrs. Temple, closetted with her younger daughter, broke to the bewildered, terrified, and anguish-stricken girl the project she had devised. She represented the brilliancy of the connexion which the family would form in the alliance of Gertrude with Lord Davenant, and the impossibility of renouncing such a golden prospect. She went upon her knees in Selina's presence—used all the arts of persuasion to induce the poor girl to accept shame, dishonour, and unhappiness for herself, in order that she might secure a splendid position for her sister. Selina

felt as if she were going mad. It was not merely sufficient that she should resign every hope of becoming the bride of him whom she loved with all her heart and with all her soul; but it was likewise necessary that she should adopt as her own that disgrace which had overtaken another! It must indeed have been a terrible scene. The diabolic sophistry, persuasiveness, and arts of the wily and wicked mother however prevailed; and after an hour's painful and agonizing interview, the unhappy young creature consented to all that was demanded of her. Yes—she yielded; but it was only under influences the most unnatural—the most abhorrent. For Mrs. Temple had declared that she would commit suicide in her young daughter's presence if an affirmative answer were not given to her atrocious demands. Thus was it that Selina agreed to renounce the hope and joy of her life—to lay a suicidal hand upon her love, her fame, and her honour—to doom the rest of existence to the dreariest isolation from the world and to the dismalest solitude of self-inflicted disgrace—to trample under foot the coronal of flowers encircling her virgin brow, and to bring a blight upon all the choicest and tenderest blossoms that festooned in their purity around her own heart. It was a dread and an awful destiny to which the young girl thus doomed herself. But still she did it—she accepted that fearful fate; and the mother who should have left the guilty one to the consequences of her guilt, threw the whole weight thereof upon the head of the innocent.

At the expiration of that dread hour of interview between the worldly-minded parent and her self-sacrificing child—an hour which perhaps witnessed excruciations of feelings more harrowed than ever human heart had known before—Mrs. Temple made Dr. Robertson acquainted with the decision that had been arrived at. He was astounded: he could scarcely believe his ears; and at first, when assured that the plan was to be persisted in, he refused to become a party to it. Then followed more entreaties—more intercessions—more beguilings on the part of that worldly-minded woman; and Selina herself, having been fetched into the doctor's presence and compelled to declare from her own lips that she accepted the destiny marked out for her, the physician consented to let those who were most interested put their own colouring and construction upon the case. The rumour was accordingly spread abroad that the disgrace was all Selina's; and the world could not do otherwise than believe it. Gertrude's conduct was such as to aid effectually in averting anything like suspicion from herself. It seemed natural under the circumstances that the family should remain in the strictest seclusion for a short time: but Gertrude was the first to appear abroad again—and her recovery being prompt, every incident thus helped to sustain that immense imposture—that stupendous cheat!

Lord Davenant acted precisely as Mrs. Temple had foreseen. Too deeply enamoured of Gertrude's charms to renounce her readily, he was likewise too honourable to make her suffer for what he believed to be her sister's guilt. The marriage was however postponed for a few months in consequence of Gertrude's representations that her spirits had received a shock, in consequence of her sister's dishonour, which would require this little interval to compose them: but at the expiration of the time the marriage took place. Lord Davenant at once bore his bride away to the Continent—and soon afterwards Mrs. Temple was seized with a severe illness, which carried her off suddenly. It was said that she died of a broken heart; and although this could scarcely have been strictly true in respect to so worldly a woman, yet that remorse for her own vile conduct,—a remorse which was rendered all the more poignant by the spectacle of her doomed young daughter's illimitable woe—produced an effect upon her, it is easy to conceive. The reader is already aware that at the time the sad affair took place at the cottage, Captain Tollemache disappeared suddenly. This was perhaps as much owing to the clamours and threats of his creditors, as to the dread of being pointed at and shunned as a base seducer. He sold his commission: but it did not appear that from the proceeds he liquidated any portion of the accounts due to his Winchester tradesmen.

With the death of Mrs. Temple her income also ceased: but Lady Davenant made Selina a liberal allowance, regularly remitted. This was done with the consent of Lord Davenant, who would not allow the unfortunate girl (as he believed her to be in every sense of the word) to fall into want, although he naturally enjoined his wife to hold as little correspondence with her as possible: for the honourable mind of that nobleman was profoundly shocked at the idea of a young woman consenting to become the wife of a worthy, confiding, and estimable man at the very time when she appeared to have been in a condition affixing upon her a signal disgrace. Lady Davenant, however, wrote incessantly to Selina. Her ladyship was a prey to a constant apprehension that her young and much-injured sister might in a moment of despair, or in a paroxysm of uncontrollable grief, proclaim her innocence, and thus divulge the fearful secret. In those letters which she was so incessantly sending to her, unknown to Lord Davenant, Gertrude reiterated all possible arguments and prayers, representations and entreaties, to induce her sister to reconcile herself to her fearful destiny. She also sent her numerous presents from the Continent; and after her return to London with her husband, she frequently despatched by the coach a variety of gifts which she thought would prove acceptable to Selina. But invariably were those gifts accompanied by epistles full of the wonted prayers and intercessions, and over which the unhappy Selina would weep the bitterest, bitterest tears in the solitude of her chamber. Mrs. Danby—a faithful and attached servant, who had been for many years in the family—was acquainted with the secret of the terrible mystery; and often and often did the good woman ascend to Selina's chamber-door and listen to ascertain if her young mistress were weeping. Then would she endeavour to console her, or else descend to the kitchen again, weeping bitterly herself at the idea of the undeserved sorrows which the fair young creature was enduring. Nancy Brown, who had only been taken into the house some weeks after the birth of the child, was kept in profound ignorance of the real truth, and never even suspected it.

Thus the time had passed on until the date of those incidents which have occupied the last few chapters. It appears that when I called upon Selina and made her acquainted with the fact that those two men, Sawbridge and the Bulldog, were watch-

ing in the neighbourhood—and for what purpose they were watching: namely, to espy her own and Mr. Cleveland's movements, and report them to some employer elsewhere,—the moment, I say, that all these circumstances were mentioned to her, she suspected something of the truth. She knew how terribly apprehensive her sister was that she should betray the secret; and it occurred to her that as Gertrude had probably heard of Mr. Cleveland's intended visit into that neighbourhood, she had become desperately alarmed lest Selina should in a moment of tenderness or despair proclaim to him her innocence.

It now becomes necessary to explain what took place between Lady Davenant and Selina when her ladyship so suddenly made her appearance at the cottage. So soon as they were alone together, after I had taken my departure, Lady Davenant began informing her sister that it was with the utmost difficulty she had persuaded her husband to allow her to pay this visit—and that indeed she had been compelled to devise an excuse for the purpose of wringing that assent from Lord Davenant. This excuse was that Selina was lying dangerously ill, even to be at the point of death,—on hearing which Lord Davenant had objected no longer. But why was it that Gertrude had been thus anxious to visit the cottage? wherefore had she left London with so much precipitation? and why had she been compelled thus to invent the excuse of a downright falsehood rather than abandon her project? It was because she had heard, not only that Mr. Cleveland was in the neighbourhood, but likewise that some kind of communication had already taken place between the house and the cottage, a young person in service at the former having visited at the latter. That young person was of course myself; and it was no wonder that Lady Davenant should have looked upon me with no very pleasing demeanour when she encountered me at the cottage—for she doubtless suspected who I was, though she did not choose to say so in my presence. It farther appeared that Lady Davenant renewed in words all those earnest prayers and entreaties which she had previously conveyed in letters—to the effect that Selina would keep the secret; and she proposed that the young lady should quit the neighbourhood the very next day, and take up her abode in some distant part of the country, Gertrude undertaking to provide for her as sweet a residence as the picturesque cottage. The reader will recollect that up to a late hour at night had the sisters remained together in the little parlour of the cottage; and during all those hours Gertrude called into requisition her entire powers of persuasion to carry her point. At one moment Selina, moved by the bitterness of her sister's grief, promised everything: but the next instant, recollecting that Cleveland was stretched upon a couch whence he never more might rise alive, she recanted all the pledges she had made. Lady Davenant appeared to grow desperate, and made use of threats. An altercation thus arose between the sisters; and it was at this moment that I had knocked at the door to summon Selina to what I then believed to be the death-bed of her lover.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

LADY DAVENANT.

Such were the explanations which Selina Temple gave in the morning that dawned upon the night of her installation at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. These explanations were given from her lips by the side of Mr. Cleveland's bed, in the presence of the worthy old couple and myself. I have not attempted to preserve the precise language in which the amiable and self-devoted girl made known the history of the past: I have given the incidents purely in a narrative form; and if there be any gaps, the imagination of the reader will supply them. Dr. Robertson was not present during the recital of the tale: but he entered the chamber immediately after its conclusion—and at once perceiving what had been taking place, he requested permission to speak a few words.

"Some blame may be attached to me," he said, in a grave and serious tone, "for having permitted at the time such an outrage against all honour and propriety, justice and good faith, to be consummated. But you must remember that in the first place it was through the unfortunate conduct of my own wife that a suspicion of something wrong had been circulated through the neighbourhood; and I was bound to repair as well as I could the injury thus inflicted. Therefore, when those who had been injured by my wife's indiscretion—to use no harsher term—suggested their own means of mitigating, if not of repairing the injury, I could not well persist in remonstrances—much less refuse my adhesion to the project. In the second place, a medical man has sometimes a difficult course to pursue. It is not because he *is* a medical adviser, he should constitute himself a family adviser also; and if in the course of his practice, circumstances render him acquainted with family secrets, he is bound to regard these secrets as if unconscious of them. In the third place, knowing but very little of Miss Selina at the time, and hearing her say in my own presence—with what appeared to me the coldness of a firm resolve, though I can now well understand that it must have been the chill of blank despair—that she consented to her mother's arrangement, and even wished it—what more could I urge? You perceive, therefore, that my conduct has its excuses—if it will not admit of the fullest justification. But believe me," added Dr. Robertson, with the mingled impressiveness and emotion of heartfelt sincerity, "that I experience the liveliest joy at beholding the happy issue of an unfortunate transaction which had already lasted much too long!"

Mr. Cleveland—who, I may here observe, had wonderfully improved during the last few hours—stretched forth his hand to the medical man, saying, "Doctor, whatever there may be disagreeable in the past, let it be buried in oblivion. We are all too happy now to suffer anything, whether in the shape of recollection or incident, to throw a fresh gloom over our souls."

"Alas, my dear Arthur!" said Miss Temple, in gently murmuring and mournful accents, as the tears traced their crystal pathway down her lovely cheeks, "there is still a deep cause for sorrow on my part. Perhaps in giving new life to myself, I may have killed my unhappy sister!"

"What would you have us do, my dearest girl?" asked Mrs. Antrobus, in the most soothing and the kindest manner possible. "You have told us how your sister, the unfortunate Lady Davenant, endeavoured to coerce you by threats and intimidation—and how she pursued you and Mary up to the front-door last night. Her conduct, my dear Selina, does not appear calculated to excite much sympathy. At the same time, it cannot be forgotten that she *is* your sister; and possessing an excellent heart as you do, it is natural that you should feel for her. But on the other hand, you must consider whether she has ever shown any good feeling towards you. She sought to erect the fabric of her own prosperity upon the ruins of your happiness. I do not know much of the world; but all my experience of it—all that I have ever heard and all that I have ever read—does not afford me an illustration of anything so terrible as the conduct which has been pursued towards yourself."

"Ah, my dear madam!" responded the weeping Selina, "it was not so much the sense of that cruelty which at length determined me to reveal the whole secret, but it was because I could no longer endure the consciousness of being the object of scorn and shame—perhaps detestation—on the part of him whom I so fondly loved."

Thus speaking, Selina took Arthur Clevelaud's hand—carried it to her lips—retained it there—and covered it with her kisses and her tears. It was indeed full easy to perceive, by the brightness which came back to Cleveland's eyes and the colour which returned to his cheeks, that love is the sovereign anodyne for ministering to the restoration of the invalid!

"You asked me, dear madam," continued Selina, addressing herself to Mrs. Antrobus, "what course I would wish to be pursued in respect to my sister? If I might ask my dear friend Mary Price to undertake so unpleasant a mission, I would beseech her to repair to the cottage and ascertain if Gertrude be still there. If so, Mary," added Selina, the tears still trickling down her cheeks, "speak kindly to her—endeavour to console her. Tell her that you come from me—that I not only forgive her for the past, but in my turn implore her forgiveness for having at length revealed the secret which was entombed in that past. Tell her also that I have striven—heaven only knows how I have striven—to resign myself to that destiny which my deceased mother chalked out; but that the task became at length more than I could endure. Tell her that had Arthur never come back to this neighbourhood, perhaps I should have kept the secret inviolable to the end; but that when he did come back, and by so coming, imperilled his life in avenging what at the time he believed to be my dishonour,—human nature could no longer remain in revolt against itself. The patience of an angel would have been exhausted—much more the patience of a poor frail mortal like myself. Lastly, my dear Mary, you will tell my sister that as everything must now be made public—and that within a few days—perhaps within a few hours—the whole of this neighbourhood will become acquainted with the right version of the past history—and therefore that the intelligence must inevitably reach Lord Davenant soon—I beseech her to hasten and throw herself at his feet, and implore his pardon. Go, Mary—and be speedy: for it will be to me a state of cruel suspense until you return."

Though not much liking the mission entrusted to me, I nevertheless accepted it: for I would have done anything to please or impart consolation to that sweet and amiable young lady. I accordingly lost no time in hurrying up to the nursery, putting on my bonnet and shawl, and issuing forth upon my errand. It was now mid-day: and the sun was shining brightly down upon the road along which Selina and myself had sped in such frenzied haste in the middle of the previous night. *Then*, how little did I anticipate the marvellous and fortunate issue of the adventure in which I was engaged! But what would now become of Lady Davenant? Should I find her at the cottage? or had she taken her departure thence? and if so, whither had she gone? What also had become of Captain Tollemache? and were his spies still in the neighbourhood?

Such were the thoughts and questions that I was revolving in my mind, while walking along towards the picturesque cottage: but all on a sudden a bend in the road brought me face to face with the two dread objects of my last self-put query—the Bulldog and Sawbridge!

"Mary Price, by jingo!" exclaimed the latter.

"And I'll be bound it's all her precious meddling that has put an end to this game of ours:"—and as the Bulldog thus spoke, his looks were fixed upon me with a cold-blooded and brutal ferocity.

I endeavoured to pass them by: but the last-named monster caught me rudely by the arm, exclaiming, "Stop!"

I threw a quick glance around, in the hope that some one might be approaching: but there was no such succour at hand.

"You needn't be afeard," resumed the Bulldog: "your life is of no use to us—and I don't know that it's worth while to run the risk of a halter by knocking you on the head. At the same time I really could throttle you: for there never was such a precious meddler in this world. Here was we set to watch a couple of houses—and a couple of people too—and one of the very first things we see is you going from one house to the other. Howsomever, it's all over now: we've got our blunt—and that's all we care about."

"So we can very well afford to let you go on your way without knocking your brains out this time," added Sawbridge, in the form of epilogue to his friend's observations. "Come, Ben, let's toddle on and leave Mary Price to go and poke her nose into the next adventure that may turn up."

"Well, before we leave her," rejoined the Bulldog, his countenance becoming if possible even more diabolically ferocious than was its wont, "let's give her a little bit of advice: and that is to mind how she crosses our path the next time we have got any business in hand; for I'm blowed if I'll put up with it any more. So now you understand me, Miss Mary; and for all your pretty face, and fine black eyes, and white teeth, I'll spile your beauty for you if I ever catch you meddling where I am concerned again."

Having given vent to these brutal threats, the Bulldog passed on his way, accompanied by Nick Sawbridge—while I hurried on to the cottage, infinitely delighted to think I had got quit of them so

easily. If any doubt had before existed in my mind as to who the employers of these men had been, it was now cleared up; and it was a source of deep satisfaction to have received the assurance that their mission in that neighbourhood was at an end.

On gaining the cottage, I plunged my looks into the parlour of the ground-floor to see if I could discern Lady Davenant; and methought that I beheld a female figure much resembling her, pacing to and fro within that apartment. I certainly felt somewhat nervous and apprehensive as to the scene which might ensue: for I had beheld enough of Lady Davenant on the previous day, and had judged sufficiently of her temper while she was pursuing us in the night, to entertain these misgivings as to the reception she might give me now. And that it was she herself whom I had seen through the window, I was speedily made sure of: for even before my hand had touched the knocker, the front-door was suddenly opened—and by Lady Davenant in person.

"Walk in," she said, in a cold tone, which was as inscrutable as her looks: for though her countenance was very pale, yet her features were rigid, and it was impossible to penetrate the thoughts that were passing behind. She proceeded before me into the parlour. I followed and shut the door. "Now sit down," she said, in a voice of command rather than of invitation. I obeyed—and she took a seat upon the sofa. For a few moments she remained silent, with her large dark eyes fixed upon me as if to penetrate the object of my presence.

"I come from your ladyship's sister," I began by saying.

"And she has of course made her peace with Arthur Cleveland?" observed Lady Davenant, still cold and unfathomable. "You need not answer my question in words: I see that I am not wrong. But to have made her peace with him she must have told him everything! Now reply truly, young woman—is this the case?"

"It is, my lady," was my immediate answer. "As for giving you true replies to whatsoever questions your ladyship may put to me, I am incapable of doing otherwise. And now, if your ladyship will permit," I went on to say, not heeding the scornful curl of the lip which she gave at my remark, "I will deliver a message wherewith Miss Temple has entrusted me. And believe me, Lady Davenant, that it will suffer much in the affectionate tenderness of its tone and language when coming second-hand from my lips."

"Proceed," said her ladyship, coldly and proudly.

I thereupon delivered the message which Miss Temple had sent, and which I need not recapitulate to the reader. Not a muscle of her countenance moved until I reached that point where the advice was given to urge her ladyship to hasten and throw herself at her husband's feet and implore his forgiveness. Then I perceived a quick and ominous alteration growing over her features: first they flushed—next they relapsed into a dead cold pallor again—then they burnt with the deepest red, while her eyes flashed fire and her lips quivered. They were in truth magnificent eyes which thus darted forth their lightnings at me; and that was a veritably aristocratic mouth, in its classic chiselling and haughty wreathing, which quivered with its red lips—those lips that revealed teeth of pearly beauty.

"Enough!" she suddenly exclaimed: "I wish to hear no more. You have delivered your message from my sister; and now you will be pleased to listen to what I have to say, and bear it back as a message to her. I am not going to treat you, Miss Mary Price, all heroine of romantic adventure as you are, with any of those fine scenes to which you are so much accustomed: but I am going to tell you a few plain truths, which you will have the kindness to repeat to my sister."

"For heaven's sake, Lady Davenant," I exclaimed, "send back no message that will plunge a dagger into her heart!"

"A dagger into *her* heart!" echoed Gertrude with demoniac bitterness and ineffable scorn: "how sharp is the dagger which she has plunged into *mine!* She has torn the mask from my face, and revealed me to the world as I am—not as I have appeared to be. Well, let it be so: I will not put on that mask again. If she has shown me depraved, let me glory in my depravity; and as I now seek for the bitterest vengeance against her——yes, against my own sister——I know that the direst vengeance I can inflict, will be to inform her how depraved I have already been and how still more depraved I can yet become!"

"Oh, this is shocking!" I exclaimed, absolutely terrified, not merely by the dreadful words but also by the still more dreadful looks of Lady Davenant: for there was not only in her air the ferocity of a tigress, but also the brazen effrontery of a woman who has resolved to fly in the face of all decencies and defy the whole world.

"Puling, whining, canting thing that you are!" she said, the words hissing serpent-like between her parched lips: and catching me violently by the wrist, she gave me a kind of wrench that made me fall back upon the chair from which I had started up. "You *shall* listen to me—and the more you interrupt me, the longer will this interview be continued; so that if it is really painful to you, it will be your own fault how long it lasts."

I accordingly held my peace — but as much through terror at this infuriate and desperate woman, as in the hope of speedily escaping from her presence.

"Go back to my sister," she continued, "and tell her that I am henceforth resolved to lead a life that shall be shackled by none of the foolish conventionalisms and ridiculous forms which prudes and hypocrites have devised wherewith to bind society. Tell her that I have the means thus to enjoy myself; and I shall not fail to make use of them. Fortunately I obtained from my husband, in an hour of drivelling fondness and uxorious weakness on his part, the settlement of a considerable sum upon myself, dating from the period of the bequest. Therefore in a pecuniary sense am I independent; and my own strong will shall make me equally independent in a moral sense. But you have yet more to hear—and more to tell my sister. Know then, that I never loved my husband; but I have always loved Tollemache passionately, devotedly. He followed us all over the Continent; my interviews with him were frequent—and they never were suspected by Lord Davenant. On two or three occasions that insipid sentimentalist and love-sick young man, Arthur Cleveland, was seen by Tollemache in some of the continental towns which we visited; and pity it was that the Captain did not

provoke him to a duel *then*, and kill him outright. But as Cleveland never hinted in Lord Davenant's presence, nor in mine, that he had seen Tollemache, it was thought expedient to let things take their course. You have to tell my sister that Tollemache has been my lover ever since my marriage—as he was before it—and as he will continue to be, as long perhaps as I have money to lavish upon him."

These last words were spoken with a strange bitterness; as if Lady Davenant fully comprehended the selfishness of Captain Tollemache's feelings towards her—but also as if the very fact of her connexion with such an unprincipled character was a part and parcel of that depravity of which she was now making a glory and a boast.

"You know," she continued, "that a couple of villains were set to watch the actions of Selina and Cleveland—yes, you know it, because you came and gave Selina the information yourself. She told me so last evening. Well, doubtless you suspect by this time that those two ruffians were hired by Tollemache for the purpose. It was at my request that he took that step. How he found out such a pair of accomplished villains, I do not exactly know: it is another proof that the man whom I boast of as my lover, is well acquainted with the vile dens of the metropolis in which to search for the human reptiles that are requisite for evil purposes. I myself have not seen those ruffians: but I am told that they know you well, Mary Price—and you know them; and therefore you may judge whether Tollemache was happy in his selection."

"Lady Davenant," I exclaimed, in mingled horror and amazement—for I began to fear that anguish and excitement had turned her brain, and that she must be mad; because her language, her accents, and her looks were all too well calculated to justify such a suspicion.

"Silence—and hear me!" she cried vehemently; and again she forced me back into my seat. "My sister has advised me, through you, to hasten home and throw myself at my husband's feet? Splendid advice! charmingly romantic! The only misfortune is, that I do not feel disposed to follow it. Therefore, since the long dreaded catastrophe has come and the explosion has taken place, I have but one course to adopt. What that is you will know in a few minutes:"—and as Lady Davenant spoke she looked at her watch. "Yes—it is half-past one o'clock; and that is the time named. When you return to Selina, you may tell her all that I have now told you;—you may tell her in addition that since she has thought fit to expose me to the world, she shall have to blush for her sister until the end of her life! Tell her that if I am now about to brave public opinion, set the world at defiance, and break all those ties which are generally considered the most sacred and binding,—it is she herself who has forced me into such a path. For her, then, will be the satisfaction of having made her sister become a mark for the finger of scandal and scorn to point at. Oh! I know the sensitive feelings of Selina full well; and through that medium will I punish her. But, Ah! here is the last scene of the present drama."

These words were elicited by the sudden appearance of a post-chaise and four, which coming from the direction of Winchester, dashed up to the front of the cottage.

"I am now about to depart," said Lady Davenant, putting on her bonnet and scarf, which were in readiness. "But you see that I am not about to avail myself of the private carriage which brought me down hither," she added, in accents of bitter irony. "No: that equipage belongs to my husband; and I will not take it from him. Would you wish to know who is now to be my travelling companion? Behold him!"

As she thus spoke, I observed Captain Tollemache leap out of the post-chaise—a circumstance for which I was not altogether unprepared after the language that this depraved woman had been addressing to me.

"Now, Mary Price, I bid you farewell," she said, in a strange wild tone. "You can return to my sister and tell her all that has taken place."

Thus speaking, she hastened from the room; and meeting Captain Tollemache in the garden, was at once conducted by him to the post-chaise. They entered it—Lady Davenant waved her white kerchief in derisive farewell from the window—and the equipage dashed away. She had gone, that woman!—gone in company with her lover—gone without bestowing a parting kiss upon her child, which was within the walls of the cottage—gone without even appearing to devote a thought to that innocent little being!

Scarcely had she left, when Nancy and Mrs. Danby came into the room; and by their looks, rather than by words, they inquired what had happened. I told them all that had taken place at Mr. Antrobus's house—how Selina's secret was a secret no longer, and how she was reconciled to Arthur Cleveland. This was the first intimation which Nancy had received of the real truth in respect to her young mistress; and she was as much rejoiced as surprised to learn that, after all, Miss Temple was innocent of past wrong and that she had now every prospect of receiving virtue's reward. As for Mrs. Danby—who appeared to be a very worthy and excellent woman—she wept for joy at the intelligence which I imparted to her, but the nature of which she had suspected, or rather foreseen, from the moment I had fetched Selina from the cottage during the past night.

I did not remain there many minutes after Lady Davenant's departure: I remembered that Selina had intimated to me that her suspense would be great until my return—and I accordingly left Mrs. Danby and Nancy to talk over the matter together, while I hastened back to the house. The moment I made my appearance, Selina came down from Mr. Cleveland's chamber to ascertain what intelligence I brought; and when I told her that her sister had just departed with Captain Tollemache, she became overwhelmed with grief. As a matter of course I broke the tidings to her as gently and as delicately as I could; and the reader may rest assured that I repeated very little of all that Lady Davenant had said to me. Mrs. Antrobus united her endeavours with mine to console the young lady as well as we were able; and my mistress said, "After all, dearest Selina, there was scarcely any other result to be anticipated in respect to your sister. It was not likely that she would return to her husband: but in the course which she has now chosen to adopt, there is nothing for which you, my dear girl, can blame yourself."

To be brief, Mrs. Antrobus said and did everything she could to console Selina: but she evidently felt deeply on her sister's account. Three or four days elapsed ere she showed signs of returning cheerfulness; and then, as she found Mr. Cleveland progressing rapidly towards a state of convalescence, the smiles came back to her angelic countenance.

A letter was written to Lord Davenant, explaining to him all that had occurred. This letter was dictated by Arthur Cleveland himself, and signed with his name: it was couched in the most delicate terms that circumstances would permit; and the reason that he gave for sending such a communication at all, was that he considered it to be his duty, as Lord Davenant's friend, and as the intended husband of Lady Davenant's sister, thus to put his lordship into possession of the whole particulars of the unfortunate history. The return of post brought a reply, showing that Lord Davenant deeply felt the blow which had thus stricken him; but he declared that although his own happiness was now ruined for ever, yet he fervently hoped that the fullest measure of felicity would be enjoyed by Arthur Cleveland and Selina. It is scarcely necessary to state that the circumstances which I have been relating, produced the greatest sensation and the utmost surprise throughout the entire neighbourhood. Visitors were calling all day long at the house to inquire after the health of Mr. Cleveland, and to pay their respects to Miss Temple: many noble and very wealthy persons residing in the vicinage, and who were previously unacquainted with the Antrobuses, likewise called to testify the sympathy and kind feeling which Selina's romantic history had excited. At the expiration of ten days Arthur Cleveland was so far recovered as to be able to descend from his chamber and take a little exercise in the garden. I need hardly say that Selina was his constant companion, or that their happiness appeared now as complete as it well could be,—the only drawback thereto being the conduct which Lady Davenant was pursuing. For it appeared from a letter which Mr. Cleveland received from a friend, that her ladyship and Captain Tollemache were living openly together at Bath.

Selina had remained altogether at the house of my master and mistress since the memorable night on which I fetched her thither. Nancy and the child had likewise removed from the cottage: for Selina had conceived the most generous affection for the innocent little being—and as it was neglected, or rather altogether abandoned by its own mother, Mr. Cleveland readily assented to his beloved Selina's wish that she should still be permitted to keep charge of it.

It was about a fortnight after the duel, that I received a letter from my brother William containing a sad piece of intelligence. This was to the effect that our worthy friend and benefactor Mr. Collins had died suddenly, and that consequently some fresh arrangements would have to be made for William and dear Jane. I at once decided upon repairing to Ashford, to see what was best to be done in the matter; and when I communicated my purpose to Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus they kindly gave me permission to pay the contemplated visit to my native place, as Nancy might take care of all the children during my absence. But I represented to my worthy master and mistress that it was possible I should be unable to return to them; for unless I could provide a comfortable and respectable home for my sister Jane, I should be compelled to settle altogether at Ashford, have her with me, and earn my livelihood by needlework. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus at once offered to allow Jane to dwell with me at their house; but of course I could not think of taxing their goodness to such an extent. I therefore promised to let Mrs. Antrobus know as soon as I got down to Ashford what my prospects and plans were; and I besought her not to be offended if circumstances should prevent me from returning. Selina was much distressed at hearing of my meditated departure; and she took an opportunity of speaking to me alone.

"My dear Mary," she said, "I need not again repeat how deep is the gratitude I experience towards you for all you have done towards bringing about the change which has taken place in my position. Mr. Cleveland experiences a similar feeling towards you; and he has desired me to state that if after our marriage—which will shortly take place—you would like to come and live with us, we shall be truly happy to receive both yourself and your sister."

This generous proposal I declined, on the same ground that I had refused the offer of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus: but in so declining it, I tendered my best acknowledgements. Selina then, with much hesitation and bashfulness, intimated that Mr. Cleveland had enjoined her, in case I should refuse the first-mentioned proposal, to offer me a sum of money for my use. The proffer was made in the most delicate terms, and could not possibly wound even the most sensitive feelings: but this likewise I declined, assuring Miss Temple that I had ample pecuniary means for my present uses, but that if I should require any friendly assistance of the kind I would not hesitate to apply to her.

I was to leave on the following morning, my place being secured in the coach which passed from Winchester at ten o'clock on its way to London. A perfect shower of gifts and memorials from Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, Mr. Cleveland, and Selina, was bestowed upon me; and these I was compelled to accept. Thus, accompanied by these testimonies of kind feeling, and attended by the genuine good wishes of all whom I left behind, I took my place in the coach and was soon far away from a neighbourhood where so many extraordinary incidents had occurred in the comparatively short space of a few weeks.

On arriving in London at about five in the evening, I resolved to proceed on my journey without delay, and accordingly took a place by the night-coach to Canterbury. In this latter city I arrived at an early hour in the morning—obtained a little rest at the hotel—and after breakfast, found myself seated in the carrier's van on my way to Ashford. While proceeding thither, I could not help reflecting upon the manifold incidents which had occurred since I was last at my native place. The reader will recollect that I left it in the service of the Bull family; but that from this family I had passed again into the household of Lord and Lady Harlesdon, both of whom had ceased to exist; and that my next place was the one which I had just left. In those three situations how much had I seen! what

an infinite variety of adventures had I passed through! If the reader will but glance back over the chapters recording them, he will discern enough to have swollen my narrative to treble its present form: but from the very first it has been my study to observe as much conciseness as possible. Often and often might I have indulged in reflections naturally suggested by the shifting scenes and changing circumstances in which I was an actress, or of which I was a spectatrix; but I have seldom, save where I deemed it absolutely necessary for the purpose of making my narrative intelligible, suffered myself to be beguiled into unnecessary comment. My object is to chronicle as faithfully as possible, and in a style as simple as may be, all that I passed through, as well as all that I saw during my period of servitude. There are perhaps some who will consider it extraordinary that so many romantic and strange adventures should come within the experience of one and the same individual: but there is no situation in life which affords so much scope for curious observation as that of a domestic servant. In respect to myself, the difference is that my own destiny or else my own feelings tended to involve me in many of those transactions and occurrences of which most other servants would have remained mere passive beholders, and in which neither fate nor sentiment would have led them to bear a part.

But I must not now deviate from my rule of conciseness at the very moment I am speaking of it. I will therefore hasten to observe that it was about noon when the four spires of Ashford church met my view; and again did I enter my native place. Alighting at the van-office, and leaving my boxes there for the present, I at once proceeded to the house which death had entered. I shed tears on beholding the shutters all closed and the blinds drawn down; and those tears were a tribute to the memory of a man who had been a sincere and true benefactor to a family which had not any positive claim upon him. In a few minutes I embraced my dear brother and sister; and their tears also showed me how much they felt the death of the good friend whom we had lost!

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE DEAL COACH.

THE reader will recollect that some time previously to the date of which I am now writing, Mr. Collins had fallen into pecuniary difficulties; and though he had surmounted them at the time, yet since that period he had put by nothing in the shape of savings. Such appeared to be the state of his affairs when they were examined into by his nearest relation after the funeral; and it was even found necessary to sell off all the personal property of the deceased in order to pay the expenses of the interment and the tradesmen's current accounts. The housekeeper, who was a very worthy woman, and had been so exceedingly kind to dear Jane, had managed during long years of servitude to save up enough to make her old age comfortable; and having relations in another county, she decided upon passing the rest of her days with them. She bade us all an affectionate farewell, declared that she should always be glad to hear from us, and then took her departure from a town where she had dwelt during the greater portion of her life.

The reader cannot have forgotten a certain letter which, at the period of my poor mother's death, had been entrusted to the care of Mr. Collins. After the funeral of the deceased surgeon had taken place, a sealed packet was found amongst his papers; and on the envelope was the following memorandum in his own writing:—

"September 1st, 1830.

"This contains the letter which Mary Price confided to my care. If she will follow the advice of a true friend and one who knows the world well, she will not open this packet to read the letter until she be married; or if not married, until she be several years older than she is now. Believing that my end is approaching, I earnestly and affectionately give her this counsel."

It appeared from the date affixed to this memorandum that it must have been written on the very day of poor Mr. Collins's death, and most probably within a few hours of his departure to another world: for, as already stated, the illness which had seized upon him was very sudden, and its fatal work was done rapidly. I need not add that I resolved upon following the advice contained in the memorandum—a course which met my brother William's earnest approval; for neither of us experienced any curiosity to penetrate into our departed mother's secret.

William, Jane, and I had taken lodgings in Ashford; and it became necessary to consult on our future plans. I had been to see Sarah at Talbot Abbey; and she appeared very comfortable in her place as nursery-governess there. She had still farther improved in personal appearance, even during the ten months which had elapsed since I had last seen her; and though not yet sixteen, she was so well grown that she looked at least a couple of years older. Her rare beauty has been already mentioned more than once: she had become if possible more beautiful still;—but in my heart I wished that she was not half so handsome—for she was far from being unconscious of her charms, and having a good salary, was enabled to gratify her inclination for fine apparel. In this she did not appear to be checked by Sir Edward and Lady Talbot; and when I took it upon myself to hint that I thought she was dressed a little too gay for her situation, she tossed her head indignantly, and if I had said another syllable, she would no doubt have told me to mind my own business. Therefore, to avoid unpleasant words, I held my peace; but after I had taken my departure, I could not help wishing that her notions were less elevated, her thoughts less aspiring, and her vanity of a far more subdued character.

Sarah had however a good place, so far as I could judge; and that was a great consideration. It now remained for William and myself to deliberate upon our own prospects—especially in connexion with Jane. Perhaps I should remind the reader that I was now past nineteen—that William was past seventeen—and that Jane was thirteen and a half. A fine, tall, genteel, and handsome youth was William; and being so thoroughly embued with good principles—so affectionate in his disposition—so steady in his conduct—and so completely everything that a brother ought to be, I was proud of him, and did not wish *him* to be any different from what he

was. Jane was likewise an excellent creature—gay, and playful, but artless and innocent, and withal as docile and tractable as could possibly be desired. In respect to our pecuniary resources, these lay principally with me; for William had not been able to save more than a few pounds during his residence with Mr. Collins. I had about seventy pounds in my possession,—consisting of the fifty guineas which Mr. Appleton, the Countess de Montville's uncle, had given me, and the savings of my wages in the places I had subsequently occupied. Altogether we could muster eighty pounds; and this was in our eyes a very pretty little sum to begin the world with: so I deliberated with William how we should lay it out to the best advantage. Our plans were soon settled. It was resolved that we should take a little cottage and furnish it—that he should obtain another situation at a surgeon's or druggist's, if possible—but that he should live at home with me and Jane—and that I would take in needle-work. We calculated that when all our arrangements were made, we should still have a tolerable surplus left, as a provision for any casualty that might transpire. Before however we decided upon finally settling down at Ashford in the manner thus described, we considered it prudent to assure ourselves in the first place that William could obtain such a situation as he desired and which he was competent to fill. The town was small, and the chances were therefore limited of procuring such a place. It was fortunate that we were thus prudent: for when he came to inquire, he found that there was not the least opening of the kind. At the very moment that we were discoursing, with somewhat damped spirits, upon this disappointment, a Canterbury newspaper fell into our hands; and amongst the advertisements was one presenting the very opportunity that William sought. It was inserted by a medical gentleman at Deal—offered a liberal salary—and left it to the applicant's choice

whether he chose to reside in the house or sleep at home. In all respects the various details of the advertisement exactly suited William's capacities and requirements.

The town of Deal, being on the Kentish coast, is not more than four-and-twenty miles from Ashford, as the crow flies: but having to go round by Canterbury to reach it, the journey was thirty miles in those days of coach-travelling. We should have preferred remaining at Ashford for many reasons: firstly, because it was our native place, and the remains of our mother lay entombed there; secondly, because we were so well known that I could have relied upon adequate patronage as a seamstress; and thirdly, because we wished to be as near Sarah as possible. But we were in that position which compelled us to be ruled by circumstances; and to these did we accordingly bow. William lost no time in answering the advertisement by letter. Mr. Sands, the surgeon alluded to, sent back a very hurried and laconic reply, desiring a personal interview. William accordingly repaired to Deal; and he and Mr. Sands were so well satisfied with each other, that an arrangement was promptly entered into between them. William returned in good spirits: for he liked Mr. Sands—he liked the situation which he had accepted—and he had seen several pleasant cottages to let in the neighbourhood of Deal, any one of which would suit our purposes. We accordingly lost no time in making arrangements for our departure; and we paid a visit to Talbot Abbey to explain our plans to Sarah, and take leave of her, as it might be some time ere we should see her again.

In the evening, after our return from Talbot Abbey, I wrote a long letter to Mrs. Antrobus, explaining how I was situated and the arrangements which I had thought it most expedient to make. I expressed a hope that she would not feel displeased or take it as unkind that I did not return into her service: I renewed my thanks for the treatment I had experienced at her house—assured her of the deep interest I should ever feel in the welfare of Miss Temple, who I hoped soon to hear would become Mrs. Cleveland—and concluded by soliciting the favour of a letter to inform me when that event should have taken place.

On the following morning—it was in the middle of September, 1830—we took our place in the carrier's van for Canterbury, and were soon beyond the view of our native town. Little Jane had never in her life travelled to any great distance from Ashford; and she was not only delighted with the journey, but on arriving at Canterbury, was astonished at the magnitude of that city in comparison with the town we had just left. As we had to wait three or four hours at Canterbury until the Deal coach started at five in the evening, we left our boxes at the coach-office, where we also booked our places; and then we proceeded to visit the Cathedral. As we were repairing thither, William asked me where I had deposited the money? I told him that I had kept a few pounds in my purse; but that the bulk of our little property was in my own box, which we had just left at the coach-office. He expressed a hope that the luggage would be safe; and I, who had travelled so much without ever losing anything, reassured him on that head. He thought no more of it; and we passed a couple of hours at the Cathedral.

We then obtained some refreshments; and the time drawing on for the departure of the Deal coach, we returned to the office. There we found that the luggage was all safe, as I had predicted. The coach came up—the boxes were stowed upon the roof in the usual manner—we took our places inside—and away the equipage went. At that season of the year the dusk sets in at six o'clock; and therefore we did not long enjoy a view of the road which we were travelling: but we were told by a fellow-passenger — an elderly gentleman who appeared something of an alarmist—that certain portions of it were very lonely; and he did hint in a mysterious manner that such things as robberies had taken place in that district. I did not myself share in the old gentleman's fears; and I was in the middle of some well-intended observations to tranquillize him, when the coach stopped suddenly — the horses plunged—and vehement ejaculations burst from the lips of the driver, who was the only person outside the vehicle, there being no guard. The old gentleman was now terribly frightened; and I could not help sharing his fears. These were instantaneously confirmed, as the well known and terrible voice of the Bulldog met my ears.

"Keep quiet on your box, or you're a dead man. Now, are the traces cut?"

"All right," was the response at once given by a voice which I recognised to be Sawbridge's.

"Come then," exclaimed the Bulldog, "and let's make short work of it. You get up a-top, and see to the luggage."

The next moment the Bulldog, who had taken one of the coach-lamps from its place, appeared at the door of the vehicle, and threw the light inside. He wore a black mask on his face; but I had already discovered him by his voice. He now recognized me in his turn, as likewise my brother and sister, whom he knew well by sight; and an ejaculation of astonishment escaped him. But he said nothing more to show that he had recognized us,—doubtless hoping that the tones of his voice might not have betrayed him. I should add that he presented a pistol into the coach, at the sight of which, as well as at the appearance of his masked head at the window, Jane was terribly frightened, and the old gentleman groaned in despair.

"Villain!" ejaculated William, clutching at the pistol in the sudden excitement of the moment: but my brother did not know who the ruffian was.

I shrieked out, and caught hold of William's hand. Then in a rapid voice I said to the Bulldog, "For heaven's sake take away that pistol! no resistance will be offered!"

"Well then," he growled, now disguising his tones as much as he could, "fork over your purses and all you've got, if you don't want your brains blown out."

I was about to address him by name, to let him see that I knew who he was, when it instantaneously struck me with the vividness of an inspiration, that if I did he and his desperate companion would murder us all to prevent the consequences that might ensue from such knowledge of them. I accordingly caught back the word as it were from the very tip of my tongue, and addressed him in another sense.

"For heaven's sake," I said, pretending not to know him, "do not take from us our all. We are but poor persons——"

"Hold your tongue," growled the Bulldog, still in a disguised voice. "Hand over what you've got."

I was accordingly compelled to give him my purse; and the old gentleman speedily followed my example, imploring the man in the most piteous terms not to do him any mischief. William however made no sign of compliance with the ruffian's mandate, but did his best to tranquillize poor Jane, who was terribly frightened.

"Now then, what about them boxes?" exclaimed the Bulldog, who either did not notice that William had surrendered up nothing, or who else thought that a mere youth of his age was not likely to have anything worth the taking.

"Hand us up the darkey," responded Sawbridge, meaning the coach-lamp. "There is but three boxes, and they don't seem to have nothink in them worth making swag of."

Oh! how fervently I hoped that our treasure would escape the villain's notice; and during the minute that followed the suspense which I endured was very painful.

"By jingo, here's gold!" suddenly exclaimed Sawbridge. "It's in a woman's box too: but there's nothing else worth taking."

"Come then," said the Bulldog; "look sharp."

Sawbridge leapt down from the top of the coach; and the next moment there was the rustling of trees by the road said. It was caused by the two villains as they plunged into a wood, or thicket, that fringed that part of the highway.

The old gentleman was giving vent to his lamentations—William was pacifying Jane—and I was almost reduced to despair by this terrible calamity which had beggared us all in a moment,—when the coachman descended from his box, where he had remained perfectly passive during the few minutes the robbers were engaged in their predatory work: for the whole occurrence passed in an infinitely shorter space of time than it has taken me to relate it.

"Well, here's a pretty go," said the coachman, approaching the window: "they've took my silver turnip,"—meaning his watch,—"and all my money, and they've cut away the 'osses."

"You scoundrel, you!" exclaimed the old gentleman, whose terrors were succeeded by a violent fit of passion: "you was either in league with them, or else you're the greatest coward in the universe."

"I say, sir," replied the coachman, "mind what you're talking about. Everybody knows me on this road, and will speak to my honesty. But who the deuce could do anything against chaps with loaded pistols?"

"Then look to your horses, and let us get on as quick as we can," rejoined the old gentleman, testily.

"I had better help him," said William, "or we may remain here all night:"—but ere he leapt out of the coach, he said in a very low and rapid whisper to me, "Good heavens, dear Mary, what a dreadful misfortune!"

"We must make the best of it, William," was my response: for I did not choose to render him more wretched than the poor fellow must have felt. He got out of the coach and assisted the driver to recover the horses, which had strayed to some little distance, where they were however found nibbling the grass by the road-side. The animals were brought back to the vehicle; and by means of some pieces of cord the harness was sufficiently repaired to enable the coach to proceed on its way. Before, however, it started, William clambered up to the top and ascertained the amount of mischief done to our boxes. He found everything tossed out pell-mell on the roof of the coach, our things mingled with those of the old gentleman: he therefore put them all indiscriminately back into the boxes, leaving the proper assortment to be made at the end of the journey. Re-entering the coach, he resumed his place by my side; and we proceeded on our way. In about a quarter of an hour we reached the town of Sandwich; and at the tavern where the horses were changed, a full account was given of the robbery. I did not however drop the slightest hint that I knew who the ruffians were: for too well recollecting the horrible threats which the Bulldog had levelled against me when I met him in the neighbourhood of Winchester, I was fearful that if a hue and cry were raised on information given by me, and if he and his companion should evade the pursuit of justice, they would not fail to seek the first opportunity of wreaking a deadly vengeance upon me. I therefore considered it more prudent to hold my peace: for knowing what desperate miscreants they were, I stood in mortal terror of them.

Dispirited and unhappy did we all feel, as the coach pursued its way: and cheerless enough was our entrance into Deal, where we had anticipated to arrive in the same comfort and hopeful condition of mind we were in when first taking our seats in that ill-fated vehicle. Fortunately we were not altogether penniless, as William had three pounds in his purse: but how different was our position now from what it had been with our little treasure of eighty! We stopped for the night at the tavern where the coach put up: our clothes were separated from those of the old gentleman—and we found that nothing had been taken except the money. It was not till now, when we were all three seated alone together in a room at the tavern, and partaking of refreshments, with however a sad heaviness at our hearts, almost rendering food unnecessary—that I told William and Jane who the two highwaymen were. They were much surprised at the intelligence I thus communicated, especially as I had not before named the fact with a view to having a pursuit instituted. But when I informed them of my reasons, they heartily concurred in the prudence which had dictated my silence: for William especially knew enough of their characters to be well aware of the danger of provoking their rancour. We endeavoured to cheer each other as well as we could; but both William and I felt in our hearts that the calamity which had occurred was a fatal blow to all our previously arranged plans. Poor Jane was too young and inexperienced to comprehend the extent of the misfortune which had thus overtaken us; and while conversing in her presence, William and I spoke as guardedly as possible, so as to avoid making the poor girl completely unhappy.

Little was the sleep which visited my eyes that night; and I lay thinking of what was now to be done. There were several persons to whom I could apply for money if I chose. Mr. Appleton had

bade me regard him as a friend: but really I felt that I had not the slightest claim upon him. The Percivals would assist me: but how did I know whether they could at the moment afford it? for though doing well, yet all their money might be locked up in their farming operations. Mrs. Antrobus or Selina Temple would either of them cheerfully comply with any request that I made to them: but would it be quite right to seek such a service at their hands, after having declined returning into the former lady's service? Besides, there was one cogent reason which applied generally to all these cases, one as well as another; and this was a deep dislike which I experienced to ask any favour of a pecuniary character. Therefore I resolved to trust entirely to my own resources—to meet the calamity with a becoming fortitude—and to act as the altered circumstances in which I found myself placed, should, after due deliberation with my brother in the morning, seem to suggest. There was one subject for self-congratulation: which was that the ring Lady Harlesdon had given me and which I treasured as a memento of that deceased lady, was not plundered from me by the Bulldog at the same time that he took my purse.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

THE PILOT'S WIDOW

After breakfast in the morning I advised William to go at once to Mr. Sands, announce his arrival, explain to him the calamity which had befallen us on the preceding evening, and see whether that gentleman would of his own accord suggest any course for us to pursue. My brother lost no time in doing as I desired; and during the hour of his absence I waited with some degree of suspense—for a great deal depended upon his interview with the surgeon. Unfortunately Mr. Sands was not married; or else perhaps his wife might have at once interested herself in my position so far as to recommend her friends to give me needlework. But on the other hand, Mr. Sands himself being a medical man, and consequently having access to a large number of families, might do this. I must say that I somewhat repented having quitted a place where I was so well known as Ashford, and having come to one where I was a perfect stranger; and in my present position, I felt as if I had dropped from the clouds. But it had all been done for the best; and there was no use in repining.

At the expiration of the hour William came back; and I at once saw by his countenance that he had no particular good tidings to impart. The moment that from the window I saw him coming, I purposely sent Jane into the bed-room where she and I had slept, desiring her to pack up our things, but really with the object of having an opportunity of conversing alone with William.

"I have seen Mr. Sands," he said; "and he received me very kindly. He was in a very great hurry, having a number of poor patients to receive at this hour in the morning; and therefore I was compelled to wait until he had a moment to talk to me. But it was indeed only a moment that he could give me—for his gig was waiting to take him into the country. I told him of what had happened last night, and how you were now situated with Jane. He said that the best thing to be done was for me to take up my quarters at his house, and for you to hire a lodging immediately, so that when he had more time to think of the matter he would see what was to be done. As I have before told you, he appears a good-hearted man, but in a world of bustle and hurry; and I do not think that he can fail to sympathise with your position. He bade me devote myself to you for the rest of the day, and repair to his house in the evening. By the bye, he added that you may give a reference to him if needful, in taking a lodging."

"Well, dear William," I answered, "there is no other course to be adopted. We will at once go out and look for a lodging, so as to avoid incurring any farther expenses at this tavern."

William, I, and Jane accordingly sallied forth together, having previously inquired of the landlady of the hotel where we were most likely to find such a lodging as I wanted: but when I mentioned that it was merely one bed-room at a very low rent that I needed for the accommodation of my sister and myself, she did not seem much inclined to give herself a great deal of trouble to answer me. However, she said she thought there were such rooms to be had a couple of streets off, indicating the direction to which she alluded; and we accordingly proceeded thither. Deal is an old-fashioned ill-built town—the houses for the most part small and poor-looking, and many of the streets nothing better than the merest lanes. The particular street to which the landlady of the inn had directed us, consisted of a row of little four-roomed houses, in the immediate vicinage of a burial-ground; and poor though I felt myself to be at the present time—and being poor, was prepared to make many sacrifices—I could not bear the idea of cooping myself up in one of those hovels and in the sickly atmosphere of the grave-yard. We accordingly walked farther on, and looked at two or three streets of a somewhat more engaging character. Very few of the houses indicated that they possessed any accommodation in the shape of lodgings at all; and those that did would not suit the condition of our pocket. William became distressed that I should persist in offering only so low a figure as three-and-sixpence a week for a furnished bed-chamber; and he besought me to go at least to five shillings: but this I was resolved not to do; and after a couple of hours' fruitless researches I was about to declare that we would go back to the wretched-looking street near the grave-yard, when we observed a bill in a window which caused us to make one more inquiry in that quarter whither our steps had led us. This was at a neat-looking little house, almost on the outskirts of the town on the northern side, and near a wide barren tract which I afterwards discovered to be called the Sand-hills. This little cottage—for it was nothing more—was separated from the other houses near, and stood in a little garden surrounded by a low white fence. There was an air of neatness about the place which at once made me hope that we should be successful in our application there.

The door was opened by an elderly woman in widow's weeds. She had a matronly look of good-nature about her, which increased the favourable impression the aspect of her abode had already

made in my mind: but when I mentioned that I came to look at the lodging notified by the card in her window, she surveyed us with some little astonishment.

"Dear me, miss," she said, "it is but a poor room that I have to let, and for poor people."

"I can assure you that we are not otherwise," was my answer.

"Well, but you are superior folks at all events—middle-class, no doubt—and not accustomed to a little humble place like this."

I inquired the rent of the room which she had to let; and when she said three shillings a week, I requested to be permitted to see it. Still with a look of surprise amounting almost to incredulity, she invited us to walk in; and we at once entered a little parlour opening from a very narrow passage, ascending from which there was a still narrower staircase. The little parlour was comfortably furnished enough, but abounded in embellishments of a somewhat striking character. Above the little looking-glass over the mantel were a couple of cutlasses, a blunderbuss, and a brace of pistols,—none of them looking however as if they had very recently done any service, and though not absolutely neglected (for the whole place was remarkably clean) yet showing the inevitable rust of disuse. On the narrow summit of a chest of drawers, the sloping lid of which gave it the air of a desk—a very old-fashioned piece of furniture—stood the model of a little man-of-war with three masts, completely rigged, and having brass cannon pointing out of its port-holes; so that it formed altogether a perfect work-of-art of its kind. On another antique-looking piece of furniture was the model of a Deal boat—a lugger, as I subsequently learnt that it was called,—likewise equipped in all its details, even to the little anchors and the barrels for holding water. Against the wall facing the looking-glass was suspended the portrait of a bluff-looking sailor in his blue jacket, his black handkerchief loosely tied round the half-open collar of his checked shirt, and the little black hat perched jauntily on one side of his head. This portrait represented a man of about fifty; and I concluded that the original might have been the husband of the widowed occupant of the cottage. There were numerous other pictures upon the walls; but these were chiefly daubs in water-colours, representing ships of all existing kinds and in all conceivable positions. There was likewise a coloured chart, depicting the whole line of coast between Ramsgate and Dover, with the position of the Goodwin Sands opposite Deal, the guard-ship moored at its anchorage, and divers other features of the maritime scene. On a little table in a corner stood a glass case containing some extraordinary kind of fish, preserved, and sustained in the case in precisely the same position in which it was wont to swim in the water. An infinite variety of pieces of dried sea-weed, curious shells, and other marine curiosities were dispersed about the little parlour; so that there could not be the slightest doubt that the worthy woman's husband had been a seafaring man.

William and Jane sat down in this room, while the worthy widow took me up-stairs to look at the bed-chamber. It was small, but neatly furnished in a humble way—remarkably clean—and with a cheerful aspect, looking upon the shore and commanding a view of the broad expanse of sea far as the eye could reach. A little way to the left was Sandown Castle; and thence stretched the Sand-hills, to which I have already alluded, for a distance of five or six miles inland.

I expressed myself perfectly satisfied with the little chamber, and agreed to take it at once. I offered a week's rent in advance and a reference to Mr. Sands: but the good woman would take neither. She paid me the compliment to say "that I had quite the look of a young lady, as my brother appeared quite the young gentleman;" and Jane herself came in for her share of the widow's eulogies: but she added that she hoped we had not suffered misfortunes, compelling us to seek her humble abode. I told her in a very few words enough to satisfy her of our respectability; and when she heard that I had been in service, she again seemed quite astonished. She was one of those simple-minded primitive creatures who believe that one's station in life as well as the capacity of one's purse are always to be judged by one's outward appearance; and because I was well dressed, and, as she was pleased to say, "genteel-looking," she could scarcely believe that my social condition was in reality so humble. Then she grew garrulous relative to herself, telling me that her husband had been a pilot for many long years, and that he had possessed a boat of his own, of which the lugger down stairs was the exact model, as the portrait was the representative of himself. She expatiated upon his exploits in pushing off the *Saucy Sal* (which was the name of his boat) amidst the raging billows, and even in the depth of the dark wintry nights, to proceed to the rescue of mariners shipwrecked upon the Goodwin; and she added, the tears coming into her eyes, that her poor husband was drowned some ten years back in the last venture of the kind which he ever dared, and that his boat was engulfed in the furious ocean. After a pause, during which she wiped her eyes, she went on to tell me that the body of her husband was washed on shore a few days afterwards, and was buried in the grave-yard of the chapel-of-ease in Deal, where a monument had been erected to his memory by a subscription on the part of the Deal pilots. She then proceeded to state that she had a son who was a sailor on board a man-of-war at Portsmouth—that he was very good to her, allowing her what he could out of his pay, and never failing to bring her presents whenever he came to see her. It further appeared, from what she told me, that with the aid of her son, and by a little pension of twelve guineas a year from some fund, together with letting out the chamber which I had just engaged, she managed to live comfortably enough: besides which, the Deal pilots, she added, were always very kind to the widows of those who had met their death as her husband had done.

Having finished her narrative, which she told in a somewhat verbose and round-about manner, Mrs. Scudder—for such, she informed me, was her name—conducted me down stairs again to the little parlour; and there she renewed her garrulous but good-humoured and friendly-meant outpourings. She told me how her husband had been wont to employ his leisure hours in making the little model of the three-mast ship—how she had been offered

ten guineas for it over and over again—but how she had resolved never to part with it, no matter how great her need might be. She pointed to the cutlasses and fire-arms, and told me how her husband during the war-time had been a mate on board a privateer, and had fought with those weapons against the French; how he had made a deal of money at the period—had bought his boat with a part—had furnished the little cottage with some more—and had lent all the rest to a friend who disappeared the next day and never came back again, —a circumstance which the worthy dame still seemed to regard with wonder; for in the simplicity of her heart it never seemed to have struck her that the friend was a false one. She made me and William and Jane examine all the sea-weeds and shells, telling us how her husband had brought home the former, and how she herself in her younger days, "when she was a blooming, bouncing girl,"—these were her own words,—had picked up the latter. This circumstance reminded her of the period of her courtship; and she proceeded to tell us how Bill Scudder, then the handsomest young sailor connected with Deal, had fallen in love with her—and how he used to watch for her appearance on the beach to pick up shells—and how it was on the very day that she found the most curious of all the shells in her collection, that Bill Scudder popped the question, which took her so aback at the time that she dropped the curious shell and would have lost it altogether, if he had not put it into her hand again as an excuse for carrying that hand to his lips. In short, there was not an article, either of embellishment or of furniture, in that neat little parlour of twelve feet by ten, that did not remind the worthy widow Scudder of some remarkable incident in her domestic history.

Thus two hours passed away at the dame's cottage; but even then she would not let us go, although I promised to return as soon as possible from the tavern where we had been staying. She insisted upon our taking some refreshment; and we saw that we could not refuse without offending her. With marvellous alacrity she bustled about—spread a snow white napkin on the little round table in the middle of the parlour—placed bread and butter and cheese thereon—and took from a cupboard a bottle of British wine, which she insisted upon opening, although both I and William assured her that we required nothing of the sort. Then, treating Jane quite as a little child, she produced some apples and cakes from the same cupboard; and what Jane could not eat, she forced her to put in her pocket. I only mention such trifling incidents as these in order to show the kind traits of this poor widow woman's character.

Getting away from the cottage at last, we sped back to the tavern, well pleased at having obtained a lodging of so comfortable and respectable a character; and indeed the circumstance was altogether well calculated to cheer our spirits after the calamity of the preceding night. The bill was paid at the inn—a porter was sent with the boxes—and we went down upon the beach to seek an opportunity for conversation, well knowing that if we repaired at once to the lodging, Mrs. Scudder would engross us entirely unto herself. I have already said that all the money at our command after the robbery consisted of three sovereigns: our subsequent expenses had reduced this amount to two pounds ten shillings—and this sum William desired me to keep. But I would not do so, representing to him that he could not possibly enter his new situation without money in his pocket. I therefore insisted that he should take a sovereign; and we kept the thirty shillings. Ere we went to the cottage we purchased such little necessaries as were required for our immediate wants, buying however only small quantities—and, in short, showing every disposition to husband our resources as much as possible. Mrs. Scudder insisted upon our all three taking tea with her that evening; and she entertained us not only with as much hospitality as it was in her power to bestow, but likewise with as many histories of her deceased husband's exploits as she could think of. Finally, at about half-past eight o'clock, William took his departure to repair to Mr. Sands' house; and soon afterwards I retired with Jane to our little chamber, both much wearied with the walks and wanderings of the day.

I did not immediately tell Mrs. Scudder that I wanted needlework as a means of maintenance, for two reasons: firstly, because I expected that Mr. Sands' good offices would be exercised to procure me some immediate patronage amongst the ladies whom he visited; and secondly, because I thought it very unlikely that my good landlady, considering the retired life she led, and her humble position, would be enabled to render me any service in that respect. Two or three days passed without my seeing William, which I accounted for by supposing that he was very busy; and I did not like to go and call at Mr. Sands' house to inquire for him. At length William made his appearance at rather a late hour one evening. Jane had gone to bed and was already fast asleep; for we had taken a very long walk upon the beach during the day. I did not think that William looked altogether as cheerful as he was wont and as I had hoped to see him; so that I hastened to ask if he were happy in his new situation?

"To tell you the truth, Mary," he said, "I scarcely know how to answer the question. Mr. Sands has a very large practice, and I find that there is ample work in the surgery for at least two assistants; and he says that he is expecting another—but in the mean time the whole of this work falls upon me. I have been up every night preparing medicines till twelve o'clock; so that I could not possibly spare a minute to run and see you. Mr. Sands is in a constant bustle; and on two or three occasions when I have endeavoured to speak about you, he has begged me to put it off till he had more time. The day after to-morrow will be Sunday; and then I will take an opportunity of speaking to him again, as I dare say he will have more leisure then."

"And does he seem so good and kind-hearted a man as you at first expected?" I inquired, with some little misgiving upon the point.

"Yes—I think so—I hope so," returned William, but in a somewhat hesitating manner: "only I must say I think he is rather abrupt and hasty towards the poor whom he sees gratuitously every morning at nine o'clock. But on the whole, I think he has a good heart."

William did not remain long conversing with me on the present occasion, he being in a hurry to get

back; for it was with some difficulty that he had obtained Mr. Sands' permission to come out at all for an hour, in consequence of press of business in the surgery. When he had left me I fell into a fit of despondency. My prospects were indeed at the moment any thing but bright: the little money I had was slipping away—and I was in idleness. However, I resolved to wait and see what Sunday would bring forth, when William would speak to Mr. Sands concerning me; and endeavouring to cheer myself with the hope that it would not be in vain, I went to bed.

Sunday came—and as William had promised to pass the day with us, Jane and I were ready dressed by ten o'clock, expecting that he would take us to church. But William made not his appearance; and as we did not like to go out until he came, we sat at home expecting him. Hour after hour passed, and still he came not. The little dinner I had prepared got cold; and neither Jane nor myself felt any inclination to touch it. To be brief, it was four o'clock in the afternoon before William came; and though he endeavoured to seem cheerful, I saw that he was much annoyed inwardly. He said that it was impossible for him to get away sooner, as there was so much medicine to make up, and Mr. Sands was in a greater bustle than ever. I asked if he had contrived to say a few words to that gentleman upon a certain point: to which William replied that he had, and that Mr. Sands had promised to do everything in his power.

Later in the day—ere William left in the evening—he found an opportunity of telling me, unheard by Jane, that Mr. Sands had listened to him with some degree of attention, had expressed the deepest sympathy in the case, had promised to make a point of mentioning it amongst all his lady-patients, and had no doubt that he should be enabled to procure me plenty of needlework. I asked William if he thought Mr. Sands was to be relied upon: to which he replied that he hoped so—but I saw that he entertained the same feeling of uncertainty on the point that I did myself. He however spoke as cheeringly as he could; and promising to visit us again as soon as possible, he re-returned to his employer's abode.

I had not as yet suffered Jane to perceive how really embarrassing our position was becoming: for I did not of course wish to damp the buoyant spirits of my dear sister, who though so gay and playful, nevertheless had nothing giddy in her disposition, but was exceedingly sensitive. In the morning, however, I gently intimated to her that as we were now entirely dependent on our own resources, we must not be idle, but that I meant to go and seek for needlework, in doing which she must to a certain extent help me. Jane was overjoyed at the idea of being useful; and her happiness caused my own spirits to revive. We went out together, and I applied at some of the shops which by the nature of the articles they sold were likely to employ needlewomen. At one I was told that no new hands were wanted—at another that it was a bad season of the year—at a third that there were already too many seamstresses in the town—at a fourth that I might look in again in a week—at a fifth that they never gave out things to strangers without security—and at a sixth, I was asked for references. Here I replied that Mr. Sands the surgeon would speak for my respectability. The female who kept the shop accordingly said that if I could obtain a note of recommendation from Mr. Sands, she would give me work. Much cheered by this promise, I hastened home with Jane to our little lodging—penned a few lines to William to tell him what I had done, and what I required from his employer—and then proceeded to leave the note for my brother at Mr. Sands' house. There was a side-door leading into the surgery; and here it was that I knocked. The door was instantaneously opened by a short, thin, middle-aged gentleman, with a bustling air, and who seemed to be in a desperate hurry. He had a sharp look, but by no means an ill-natured one; and his manner proved to be particularly kind. From William's description, I knew him to be Mr. Sands. He asked me my business; and I told him that I was William's sister—that I had a few words to say to my brother—but that in case I should not be able to see him, I had written a note explaining my object.

"Then you have acted very prudently indeed, my dear," said Mr. Sands: "for your brother William is exceedingly occupied at present. He is an excellent lad, and I am very much pleased with him. We are excessively busy at present——But give me your note, and he shall have it."

"Pray forgive me, sir," I answered, "if I detain you for a minute: it will then be unnecessary to deliver the note at all to my brother——"

"Well, my dear, one minute—just one minute—I really can give you no more," replied Mr. Sands, taking out his watch. "Half-past three—God bless me! and I have got to be at Admiral Bowline's at a quarter to four. A good half-hour's ride and a quarter of an hour to do it in! Pray excuse me now, Miss Price—you see how hurried I am—it's a matter of life and death—the poor Admiral may be at his last gasp——"

"I will not detain you, sir," I exclaimed: "but pray, pray do what is asked in that note."

"Oh! if it's anything to serve you, I will," he rejoined quickly. "Is this your sister? Not much like you—she's chubby and rosy-faced. And now good bye. Tom, is that gig going to be ready to-day?"

"All right, sir:" and forth from the adjacent stable was the equipage brought out by the groom. Mr. Sands sprang up into the vehicle on one side—the groom leapt up on the other: "I'll not forget you," said the surgeon, nodding his head to me—and the next moment the gig was rattling along the street at a furious pace.

I lingered near the house for a few minutes in the hope that William might see me from a window and come out. But he did not. I had a great mind to ring and ask for him: but I thought that if the circumstance should reach Mr. Sands' ears, it would be deemed obtrusive on my part—and therefore I at length walked slowly away in company with Jane.

I did not expect any answer that evening, seeing how very much occupied Mr. Sands was: but when all the next day passed and still no notice was taken of my letter to William, I began to feel truly wretched. I made sure that William would find time to come down in the evening to the little cottage: but in this hope I was disappointed. In the morning I penned another note to William: and not

liking to take it myself, so fearful was I of offending Mr. Sands by appearing obtrusive, I gave a boy sixpence to convey it, though heaven knows that I was at the time looking hard even at pennies ere I expended them. During that day I applied to more shops for work, but with no better success than on the previous occasion. When the evening set in, William made his appearance; and this time there was not merely a half-subdued look of uneasiness, but a positive and visible cloud upon his countenance. Jane and I were seated in our little chamber when he entered; and feeling that it was no longer possible to conceal from my poor sister the condition we were in, I made a sign to William to speak out at once.

"The note you sent this morning, my dear Mary," he said, "quite astonished me, as it spoke of a former one which I had not received. Mr. Sands was out—he did not return till three this afternoon, having several bad cases to attend to; and when I spoke to him on the subject of your note, he was suddenly struck by the remembrance of something. Putting his hand in his pocket, he drew out the letter you had given him for me the day before yesterday, declaring that in the hurry of his occupations he had altogether forgotten it. I then asked him if he would write the few lines of recommendation which you required; and with much apparent warmth of feeling he promised to call himself on the milliner named in your note, and say all that was necessary for you. He added that he was just going out again—should pass the door of the milliner's shop, and would not fail to drop in. He did go out; and it was only half-an-hour ago that he returned. I ventured to ask him if he had thought of the little act of kindness he had promised to fulfil; when he vowed and protested that it had altogether slipped his memory, but that he would make a point of doing it to-morrow. I respectfully observed that two lines from his pen would save him the trouble—when he declared that the trouble would be a pleasure and that he could do more by speaking than writing. I then asked him if he had kindly recollected his promise to recommend you to the patronage of any of his lady-patients; when he frankly confessed that he had not, the whole thing having altogether escaped his memory—but he vowed that to-morrow he would do his best and that he was confident of procuring you ample support. Mary," added William, in a mournful voice, "I am much afraid that there is nothing to rely upon in that gentleman's promises."

"Such also is my opinion," I answered; "and I have feared so from the first moment that I saw him. He may not possess a bad heart; but his actions are precisely the same as if he did. It is evident that he promises recklessly—that being in an incessant bustle, he recollects nothing—and that he is a man who in plain terms cannot make time or put himself out of the way to perform a generous deed. Moreover, William, I am afraid that he is exacting from you the largest possible amount of work——"

"Yes, but I know that he *has* made inquiries for another assistant," was my brother's answer: "for several have already applied, and not having time to talk to them, he has told them to come back again, which they have done so often and have been so continuously put off on each occasion, that they grew tired of dancing attendance upon so volatile as well as inconsiderate a person."

"With regard to our present prospects," I observed, after some further conversation on the subject, "I am resolved to trust to myself alone, confident that there is nothing to expect from Mr. Sands—no, not even so much as a note of recommendation."

"But if the milliner to whom you applied," suggested William, "would take the trouble to call on Mr. Sands, he could not do otherwise than give an answer; and I am certain that it would be favourable. For if he could serve either of us without at all putting himself to an inconvenience, he would."

"Well, there is no harm in trying, my dear William," said I; "and I will do so to-morrow."

At nine o'clock on the following morning I was at the milliner's shop, and proffered my request that she would call on Mr. Sands.

"What? and stand the chance of being made to dance backwards and forwards for a whole week without being enabled to exchange a word with him! No, no, Miss: I can't lose my time like that. If you cannot get two lines of writing from Mr. Sands, who you say knows something about you, I am sure I could not get two satisfactory words from his lips. Therefore I must decline:"—and she turned abruptly away to put an end to the conversation.

Much dispirited by the incident, I returned to the little cottage with the determination of asking Mrs. Scudder's advice. This now appeared to be my only resource—and in short my only hope: but from the reason I have previously stated, I feared that it was one little to be relied upon. Seated with the good widow in her little parlour, I explained to her frankly and candidly how I was situated—not even mincing the fact that my pecuniary resources would be soon exhausted, and that though I had good friends in other parts of the country, it could only be the bitterest need that would induce me to apply to them.

"My poor child," answered Mrs. Scudder, with tears in her eyes, "it's no use buoying you up with hopes that can't be fulfilled. All my acquaintance lies with the pilots and their families, where there are lots of grown-up daughters who do all the needlework themselves. Bless you! there isn't a pilot of anything like a mature age that hasn't got his three or four bouncing daughters; and they are all active enough with the needle, that they may wear the fine clothes you see them walk out in. There can't be in all England a place where you are less likely to get your living by your needle than in Deal. So, for heaven's sake, my dear girl, write to your friends and get them to do something for you. As for my little rent, if I mention it at all, it is to tell you that you are welcome to stay here as long as ever you like and pay me when you can: for you are a steady girl—and as for Jane, I love her dearly."

I thanked the good woman for her advice and kind expressions; and ascending to my little chamber, I could not help sitting down and having a good cry. Not even the certainty of making poor Jane miserable could enable me to restrain my tears: they flowed fast and bitterly. What a position to be in—I who had so recently possessed what for a girl in humble life was a perfect fortune, and of which I had been so cruelly robbed! Jane, crying passionately herself, threw her arms around my

neck, saying all she could to console me. My tears relieved me—I regretted the weakness into which my feelings had betrayed me—and now did my best to console poor Jane in her turn. I then deliberated how I should act. I still was not so utterly devoid of hope as to be able to conquer my repugnance to address myself to those who, if applied to, would at once assist me with money. Suddenly an idea struck me. Dover was but eight miles distant, and therefore more accessible with our humble means—now reduced to a few shillings—than Ashford was; and perhaps Mrs. Messiter could recommend me to the patronage of ladies, if I settled in that town? I had not heard from her for a long time: but now I lost not a moment in penning her a letter, frankly and candidly explaining my situation. This I took to the post, and resolved to await the result. Two more weary and wretched days passed; and the third morning brought me the following reply:—

"No. ——, Beach Street, Dover.

"My dear Mary,

"Your letter has given me the greatest pain, adding to my already deep, deep afflictions. You may perceive that I write not from the same place where you dwelt with us. The shop has passed into other hands, and we are now living in——a garret! Oh! God be thanked that my poor dear boy was taken from me ere these afflictions came upon us; and would that Providence had likewise removed the others from a world in which they are destined to endure so much misery. Mary, we are reduced to poverty—aye, to destitution. I need scarcely tell you the cause. My unfortunate husband's addiction to drink has beggared us. Through your noble generosity he might have thriven: but the demon of intemperance had fastened its claws upon him. His customers fell off, and our downfall was rapid. It was no doubt accelerated by the conduct of Smithson, who, it appears, induced a woman named Margaret, who once

ved with us as servant, to expose him in a certain way to all the neighbourhood. That blow was fatal; and the result is the deplorable condition to which we are reduced. In short, I see nothing before us but——good God! how can I write the word?——*the workhouse!* I cannot say that I seize a moment to write this surreptitiously: for my unhappy husband leaves me only too much to myself. He is out from morning till night under pretence of seeking something to do, but in reality frequenting the pothouse and getting drink from whomsoever will give it him. Oh, if you could see him now—how altered, how changed! Alas, that I should be compelled to say it of my own husband: but to you, dear Mary, must I unbosom myself——he looks like the confirmed drunkard—the degraded sot. With such a husband, Mary, and in such a position, I am unable to succour you in any way. I do not advise you to come to Dover: for where I might once have given recommendations in such a case, I am now powerless—and perhaps an object of that scorn which a bad husband brings down upon all connected with him. With my own children literally wanting bread at this present time—which is God's solemn truth, Mary—I need not say that I am unable to send you anything. I cannot even pay the postage of this letter. Need I say more?

"Your affectionate but deeply afflicted friend,

"FANNY MESSITER."

If the tale of my sorrows had added to the poor woman's griefs, the narrative of her's as surely augmented mine. I wept over that letter,—wept over it at the recollection of the death-bed of her poor boy to whose loss she so feelingly alluded—wept over it when I pictured to myself her poor little children gathered around her crying for bread——Oh! it was too much—and I experienced something like a feeling of bitter animosity against that man who had proved such a cruel husband and such a bad father. As for the woman Margaret to whom allusion was made in the letter, I had no difficulty in recognizing her as the same with whom I had overheard Mr. Messiter conversing when amongst the blocks of granite on the harbour at the time I was in his service.

But the idea of those poor children being destitute of bread! I say that I could not support it. Hastily I examined the contents of my own purse: these amounted to barely ten shillings. Oh! if I had a sovereign to send, carefully enveloped in a letter. Without pausing to reflect any longer, I hastened off towards Mr. Sands' house; and just as I entered the street, I met William. He was hurrying along with some phials to deliver at a house close by: for, as he told me, the two boys who were kept for the purpose were both out at the moment, and Mr. Sands had sent him off on this errand as the case of the patient for whom the medicine was intended was urgent.

I turned and walked with him as far as the house to which he was going: but I would not tell why I now sought him until he had acquitted himself of his errand. Then I put Mrs. Messiter's letter into his hand, and bade him read it. I saw the tears come into his eyes as he perused that epistle; and in the depths of my soul I blessed him for possessing a heart capable of such generous sympathy.

"I have a sovereign, dear Mary," he said,—"the one which you made me keep—and I have not spent any of it. Take it—send it to this poor woman for her children——"

"It was for this that I sought you, William," was my reply. "And now hasten back, for Mr. Sands may scold you for your absence."

William pressed my hand—we neither of us said anything about my own position or prospects then—and while he sped away in one direction, I retraced my steps homeward in another. I wrote a brief letter to Mrs. Messiter, telling her that circumstances had suddenly transpired to enable me to forward her the little aid contained in the note. It certainly was not altogether the truth that I thus told her—and it was one of the very few occasions in my life that I have been compelled to approach a falsehood: but I knew very well that if I did not make her think I could easily afford the succour now sent, she would transmit it back again. I likewise desired her in my letter not to write in return until she heard from me again, as it was uncertain how much longer I should remain at Deal: this was another precaution which I took to prevent her from returning the money. I secured it inside the letter—made a parcel of it—and took it to the office of the Dover carrier, duly booking and paying for the same. Having done this, I returned to my humble lodging once more, pleased to think that for the next few days at least Mrs. Messiter and her children would not want for bread.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

DISTRESS.

A FORTNIGHT elapsed after the incident which I have just related, and in the meantime no change had taken place in my position—unless it were for the worse. During that fortnight I applied at every shop where I thought it possible to obtain needlework; but without success. I went back to the milliner whom I had asked to take references concerning me from Mr. Sands, and offered to leave the ring presented to me by Lady Harlesdon, and some other trinkets, the gifts of Selina Temple and Mrs. Antrobus, as security for any work with which she might entrust me. But she told me with a heartless coldness that she did not do business in that way—she was no pawnbroker—and that she would rather decline. I pressed her somewhat—whereupon she turned her back upon me and walked to the farther end of the shop.

All my money was gone. I had paid the rent with punctuality, making the good widow woman believe that I was not so pinched as I really was; and Jane and I had subsisted on the most frugal fare. In short we had lived upon bread-and-butter and tea. Poor William was penniless: but even from him had I kept the sad truth as to the utter lowness of my funds. He of course knew they must be pretty well exhausted, but he did not think that they were quite. I had gone alone to the milliner's shop, leaving Jane at home at the lodging. On issuing forth from that shop I remember that I spoke thus to myself:—"There is nothing in the cupboard left to eat: the last morsel of bread was consumed this morning. We must eat again presently: it is only bread that we require—but how is even bread to be obtained? For myself, I would go long—very long before I either asked for credit at the baker's or took an article to the pawnbroker's: but one of these alternatives must be adopted now—for poor Jane must not suffer hunger. Hunger!—oh! how that word goes cold to my very heart as I merely think it!"

My resolve was speedily taken. I went home, and unperceived by Jane, took a shawl from my box: then I repaired to the pawnbroker's; but it was like a guilty thing that I stole into the place, it being the broad daylight. I fancied that the eyes of all the passers-by in the street were fixed upon me—that all the inhabitants of the adjacent houses were at their windows to see me go in. My confusion was so great that I scarcely comprehended the questions which the pawnbroker addressed to me: but I remember that infinite was the feeling of relief which I experienced when I found myself once again afar from that gloomy receptacle for the tributes of poverty and extravagance. I had twenty shillings in my hand; and upon this sum Jane and I could live for some time, even including the payment of our rent. At least during the interval I should be enabled to adopt some decisive course. Most certainly should I have gone back to Ashford with my sister, were it not that I feared William was far from happy in his situation; and I could not bear the thought of leaving him altogether. Hence my resolve to remain at Deal if circumstances would possibly permit. I need hardly say that Mr. Sands had not fulfilled his promise of speaking to his patients on my behalf; and William had ceased to inquire whether he had done so. What hope, then, had I of obtaining a livelihood at Deal? My idea now was of endeavouring to procure places for myself and Jane in some family where a nursemaid and a nursery-girl were required; and in order to obtain such situations, I resolved to lose no time in making inquiries amongst the tradesmen in the usual manner. But the sum of my calamities was not yet complete: and truly was the old proverb justified, that "misfortunes never come alone."

At about ten o'clock on the following morning William made his appearance at the cottage with a pale and agitated countenance, so that I immediately saw something was wrong. I fancied that he had lost his situation; and when I asked him if it were so, he shook his head, exclaiming, "Would that it were only that! It is something about Robert."

"Oh, keep me not in suspense!" I exclaimed; "but let me know the worst at once."

He thereupon produced a letter, the contents of which ran as follow:—

"Clerkenwell Prison, London.
"October 7th, 1830.

"Dear Bill,

"I dare say you will be surprised to receive a letter from me at all, as I have never before bothered you with any of my correspondence; and you will also be surprised to receive it from such a place as this. You must not however think that I am here for prigging or anything of that sort: it's only an assault case. The fact is I am travelling about the country with a gentleman named Tomlinson; and I dare say that if you have seen Mary lately, or she has written to you, she has told you that I am acquainted with this gentleman. Well, the other night we got into company with a fellow who tried to cheat us at cards; and so we both gave him an uncommon good thrashing. He had the baseness to call in a constable to take his part; and so we thrashed the constable too—and it served him right for poking his nose where he oughtn't. The end of it was that me and Tomlinson were hauled off to the station-house, and taken up yesterday before the magistrate. There was awful perjury committed; the fellow that we first thrashed, declaring that it was us who tried to cheat him at cards; and he got a couple of witnesses to come forward and prove it. The magistrate, who was a very one-sided man, believed them in preference to us: so he fined us each five pounds for *each* of the assaults—the one on the sharper (as he really was), and the one on the policeman, with all the costs, making about twelve pounds *each*, or else to be imprisoned for forty days. So you see, Bill, here I am, lumbered for a paltry twelve pounds. Never mind Tomlinson; he must shift for himself. I don't know where the deuce Mary is at present, or I would write to her: but it struck me that as you are a saving kind of a fellow, it is most likely you have got a little snug hoard put by; and if so, you won't let your own brother remain in lavender for the sake of a paltry twelve pounds. To convince you that it is no gammon, and nothing of a plant on my part to do you out of your tin, you can send it up to the governor of this place, if you like, taking care to say that it's for Mr. Constantine Cavendish; for that's the name I gave at the time, for fear of bringing disgrace down upon our own excellent name of Price. The prison-regulations say that there is to be no letter-writing unknown to the governor: but that's all my eye—for I am now managing to write this on the sly, or else I shouldn't be allowed to enter into all these particulars. I hope Sarah and Jane are getting on nice: tell them to be good girls, and I will always love them. As for you, dear Bill, you know I always liked you more than any of the kit; and if I hav'n't wrote to you it is because it's so deuced slow for one brother to write to another.

"I remain, dear Bill,
"Your very affectionate Brother,
"ROBERT PRICE.

"P.S.—Don't forget that I am Mr. Constantine Cavendish here. But it would look better to put Constantine Cavendish, Esquire."

I was deeply afflicted on reading this letter; but nevertheless experienced some degree of satisfaction that it was no worse, and that it was merely a case of assault instead of any more serious offence for which Robert had been committed to prison. At the same time I knew full well in my own heart that the magistrate must have taken a right view of the case; and I was now constrained to contemplate my brother in the odious light of a sharper at cards. William and I could not prevent Jane from knowing what had happened, as she was in the room at the time; and perceiving that something very serious had taken place, she read the letter at the same time as myself. Poor girl! how bitterly did she weep on hearing that her brother was in prison.

"And now, what is to be done?" asked William. "Oh! if I had the money, how speedily should it be despatched to him. Poor fellow! because he has not an immediate answer, he will perhaps think that I do not choose to notice his letter:"—for I should observe that it had been directed to William at Ashford, and then re-directed on from the post-office there to Deal, according to instructions left by us ere quitting the former town.

In the middle of our sorrowful discourse Mrs. Scudder knocked at the door; and on being desired to walk in, she at once saw by our looks that something unpleasant had transpired. Indeed, she had suspected as much by observing the agitated countenance of William on his arrival; and hence her anxiety to learn what it was, in order to see if she could help us. I had already made up my mind how to act; and this was to pledge everything I possessed to raise the money to liberate Robert from prison. This could not be done unknown to Mrs. Scudder: and therefore I at once explained frankly and candidly what had occurred.

"Poor dear children!" she said: "you are really very fortunate. But I should think twice if I was you, before I made away with my things for a worthless brother——"

"Oh! there is no hesitation in the matter," I exclaimed. "What! leave him to the contamination of a gaol—he who——"

I was about to add the words, "is already bad enough;" but I stopped short, for though it was the truth, yet there was something shocking in giving utterance to an aspersion against one's own brother. William comprehended full well what I had intended to say and wherefore I checked myself; and he hastened to exclaim, "Oh! every sacrifice must be made to liberate Robert. I will ask Mr. Sands for an advance of salary——"

"No, William—you shall do nothing of the sort," said I, firmly: "he would put you off till to-morrow, and then again till next day, and so on, and so on—whereas every instant is precious. The money must be sent up to the governor of the gaol this evening. I know but little of the value of things in the eyes of a pawnbroker; but I believe that I possess enough in superfluous clothes and trinkets to realize the amount. We must see."

"But there are my Sunday clothes also," exclaimed William.

"Not for the world!" I again interrupted him with firmness: "you would be disgraced in your employer's eyes—you might even lose your situation—and it would only require *that* to make our miseries complete."

Mrs. Scudder, perceiving that I was firm in making away with my things, said that she was acquainted with the pawnbroker and would take them herself, as he would give her a larger advance upon them in consequence of certain representations she would make for the purpose. I accepted the worthy woman's kind offices on this melancholy occasion—especially as William had to hurry back to Mr. Sands as quick as he could, and I wanted the requisite leisure to write Robert a letter beseeching and imploring him to turn over a new leaf. William took his leave of us with a very heavy heart; and I lost no time in making a parcel of all the things I purposed to send to the pawnbroker's. The greater portion of my good clothes, the presents I had received at Winchester, and Lady Harlesdon's ring, which I most of all regretted,—all were put together for the purpose: then the obliging widow woman set off with the parcel—and when Jane and I were once more alone together, we threw ourselves into each other's arms and mingled our tears, which flowed fast and freely.

I sat down and wrote a long and serious letter to Robert, telling him very candidly how we were all situated, and what I was obliged to do in order to raise the money which he required. But I need not weary the reader with any lengthy details concerning this epistle that I addressed to my brother: suffice it to say it contained a fervent prayer for his reformation. By the time I had finished it, Mrs. Scudder came back. She had managed to obtain just the requisite sum to forward for Robert's liberation; and this, she assured me, she had succeeded in procuring with the greatest difficulty and only after much persuasion. I enclosed the money in a parcel directed to the governor—sealed the letter for Robert—and then with a heavy heart took them to the post. Jane accompanied me; and when we had paid the two letters at the office we went and sat upon the beach. There I explained to her the necessity that now existed for us to endeavour to obtain situations. She cheerfully gave her assent; and when we had well talked the matter over, we proceeded to call at several tradesmen's shops to inquire if they knew of any families requiring such servants. The replies were all in the negative; but several promised to mention the circumstance to their customers, and bade us call again.

By return of post I received a letter from Robert acknowledging the receipt of the money by the governor, and his own liberation: but he barely thanked me, and said that as for the lecture contained in the letter, "it was just like my impudence to address my elder brother in that style." He added that his poor friend Tomlinson could not raise the money to liberate himself, and that this was a source of great sorrow and annoyance to him (Robert). The letter was laconic in its terms and evidently written in a hurry: altogether it was of so unfeeling a character that both I and Jane shed bitter tears over it. Nevertheless, even when I looked into my well-nigh emptied boxes, I did not regret having parted with my things to emancipate my brother from prison.

A week passed—day after day did we call at the tradesmen's shops; but we could hear of nothing favourable. Our money was diminishing: our prospects were becoming more and more gloomy. Often did I seize my pen with the determination of writing to those from whom I was sure of obtaining assistance; but on each occasion was I withheld by those feelings of delicacy already described. Another week passed—and our funds were exhausted. Still we could hear of no situations. There were plenty of opportunities for me to obtain a place for myself, but none to accommodate both of us in the same family. When it was dusk one evening, I again found myself stealing along to the pawnbroker's to raise a few shillings upon some articles of clothing out of the scanty wardrobe remaining to me. On returning to the lodging and offering the week's rent to the worthy widow woman, she refused to take it: but I happened to know that she herself at the moment was much straitened and even embarrassed, a remittance which she expected from her son not having arrived, nor any letter to account for the delay. I therefore compelled her to take the money, making her believe that I had more for myself than I really had. And now, during the next fortnight, it was one continuous struggle against poverty. Three or four more visits to the pawnbroker reduced my own and Jane's wardrobe to a residue of the barest necessaries. In short, there was nothing more to part with; and still we were as far off as ever from obtaining the means of earning our own bread. As well as I could, did I conceal our situation from dear William, knowing that he would insist upon making away with his own apparel to help in supporting us; and this I would not have him do on any account. Often and often, when there was but a morsel of bread in the cupboard to eat, did I go out by myself—walk about, or sit down upon the beach—and when I returned, make Jane eat what there was, assuring her that I had partaken of a roll

or a bun during my ramble—whereas at the time I had not literally one penny to purchase so much as either the roll or the bun! Poor Mrs. Scudder herself was struggling against difficulties on account of the delayed remittance from her son, so that from her likewise did Jane and I conceal as well as we were able our wretched condition. Oh! poverty is a sad, sad guest; and at that period I felt its presence most keenly. At last I was resolved to do for Jane's sake what I never would have done for my own; and this was to sit down and pen a letter to Selina Temple, representing my situation and asking her for a few pounds. I was taking it to the post, when on my way thither I met Mr. Sands.

"Well, Miss Price," he said, grasping my hand, "it is a long time since I have seen you, and upon my word, I am ashamed to look you in the face! But I have been so dreadfully busy—and am indeed in such a bustle now, that every minute is of value. But still I must stop and ask you how you have got on. I remember you wanted needlework—I promised to speak to my lady-patients; but if it had been for the salvation of my soul I should have forgotten it. However, I suppose you have not been idle—you have managed to rub on—and if it is not too late, I will really and truly make a point of speaking for you. But, heavens! half-past twelve," he cried, looking at his watch; "and I have got to be at the other end of the town in five minutes. My horse has gone lame, and I am compelled to trot about on foot."

"I am obliged to you, sir, for your offer," was my response, delivered somewhat coldly, but of course respectfully: "it is now too late. This letter, which I have in my hand, is an application to a lady a long way off, for the means of taking me and my sister away from a place where we have suffered so much misery:"—and I burst into tears.

"Misery!" he exclaimed, evidently shocked; and putting back his watch which he had been holding in his hand, he said, "You don't mean to tell me that you have suffered any privations?"

"Privations, sir! the greatest—the deepest. I have been living in a forced and unwilling idleness. You know how cruelly we were robbed of our little all on our journey hither——"

"True! I had really quite forgotten it. I remember now. William told me all about it—and I really meant to do something. Upon my word, I have been thoughtless! But come along with me."

And appearing to think no more of his appointment at the other end of the town, Mr. Sands hurried me towards his own house. He made me take his arm; and as we proceeded, he went on talking in this strain:—"The worst of it is, I am always in such a desperate hurry. I know that I promise a great many things which I mean to do at the time, but which I never perform. It is a sad fault of mine; but it's constitutional, I suppose. I can't help it. Deuce take it! how could I have neglected you thus? And your brother William too, who is such an excellent youth, and gives such satisfaction! By the bye, I am afraid he is over-worked—I really must get another assistant."

While he was thus rattling away, the idea settled in my mind that after all he might be a very good-hearted and well-meaning man, but terribly thoughtless and rash in his promises, thus buoying people up with hopes which were not destined to be fulfilled, but yet little suspecting the amount of misery he might cause. I had not however much time for reflection: for he hurried me on through the streets at an almost frantic pace; and on reaching his house he at once introduced me into the parlour, where he bade me sit down. He then rang the bell violently; and as his summons was not instantaneously answered, he kept on ringing away till a female-servant made her appearance.

"What the deuce do you keep me waiting like this for?" he exclaimed. "You know my time is precious. Now listen: I am not at home to any one for the next half-hour. No matter who sends, or who comes, or who's dying, or who tumbles down and breaks his arm or leg—I won't be disturbed. For once in my life I mean to devote a whole half-hour to make amends for past neglect. You understand me—and now be off."

The servant, evidently accustomed to her master's wayward moods and strange caprices, showed little surprise at these orders,—the small amount of astonishment she did exhibit being no doubt caused by the circumstance that Mr. Sands meant to devote an entire half-hour to any one individual at all.

"Now, Miss Price," he said, when the servant had withdrawn, "please to tell me everything. I will listen patiently, and will not even look at my watch."

"I have little to tell you, sir," was my answer, "beyond this—that I have been totally unsuccessful in obtaining any employment. I have my younger sister entirely dependent upon me. A sudden demand, made by my eldest brother a few weeks back, compelled me to part with nearly all I possessed; and the remainder has gone to support myself and sister. We have no debts; but at this instant we are penniless. Why should I blush to avow that the contents of our boxes are at the pawnbroker's?"

"Good heavens! and to some extent all this has taken place through me! How foolish—how inconsiderate I have been. But it is just like me—it's the fault I have. However, it is better to make amends than prove callous and indifferent."

He had started from his seat at the conclusion of my observations, and was now walking about the room in an excited manner as he thus spoke.

"This letter," I continued, "which you can read, sir, if you please, will show you the situation to which I have been reduced:"—and breaking open the epistle that I had addressed to Selina Temple, I handed it to him. He took it and glanced his eyes rapidly over its contents: but still I saw that he lost not a word. He had a habit of doing everything in a violent hurry—even to reading.

"I am positively shocked!" he exclaimed, handing me back the letter. "I see that you mention me and my promises; and perhaps you speak more lightly and generously than I deserve. However, let us see what is to be done. You have pledged all your things. Where are the duplicates—or whatever they call them?"

"Here they are, sir:"—and as I produced them I felt that my cheeks were reddening with shame.

"Fifteen pounds in all," cried Mr. Sands: then pulling out his purse, he produced two ten-pound notes, adding, "Take these, my poor girl, as a little present—or I should rather say as an atonement for all the misery I have caused you through my rash

promises." Having said this, he again rushed to the bell and rang it violently. The servant was not this time so long in answering the summons; and when she appeared, he said, "Tell William Price to come hither."

In a few minutes my brother made his appearance; and he was evidently much surprised to find me there. The light of hope beamed upon his countenance; and as he saw the bank-notes that lay upon the table together with the pawnbroker's duplicates, he comprehended it all, and with tears in his eyes murmured forth a few words of gratitude to Mr. Sands.

"There's enough of it," interrupted this gentleman. "You must not think that I possess a bad heart: but I know that I am deuced thoughtless. Now, William, I am aware you are over-worked here; and I tell you what you may do. Go and tell that young man who left the credentials three or four weeks ago and has called every day since, that I accept his services; and he may come and take up his quarters here to-morrow. But wait—don't run away directly. Should you like to have your sister Jane here to live with you for a year or two, till she is old enough to do something for herself? She shall be entirely with Mrs. Parsons,"—meaning his housekeeper: "and she can do the needlework of the house and help Mrs. Parsons a little. What do you say, Miss Mary? If this plan is adopted, you can then soon manage for yourself: but don't think of needlework. It's all nonsense: there are too many seamstresses already. If you like to go out to service again, trust to me for recommendations; and *this time*," he added emphatically. "I really will not forget you. There now: I don't want another word of thanks. Does all this suit you?"

Both I and William cheerfully gave our assent: for one of my chief objects was now accomplished in finding a comfortable home for my dear sister. Mr. Sands hastened to his sideboard—produced wine and cake—forced us both to partake of refreshments—and then suddenly looking at his watch, cried, "The half-hour is up, by Jove! and a minute beyond it!" He then rushed from the room without saying another word, leaving me and William to exchange congratulations upon this sudden, most unexpected, and equally extraordinary turn in our fortunes. We were indeed supremely happy. It appeared as if a friend had dropped down from the clouds; and we could of course come to no other conclusion than that Mr. Sands was a very generous-hearted and well-meaning person after all. We walked out together, William to perform the mission entrusted to him relative to the new assistant—and I to hasten home with the good tidings I had to impart.

"The day after to-morrow is Sunday, dear Mary," said William, as we were about to separate; "and I am sure after what has taken place, Mr. Sands will let me pass the whole day with you—especially as we shall have the new assistant. I think it will be one of the happiest Sundays we shall ever have spent together."

"It will, dear William," I replied: and we then parted. The moment I reached the door of the cottage, Mrs. Scudder saw by my countenance that something favourable had transpired. Jane was with her in her little parlour; and when I told them all that had happened, I really know not whether my sister or the good-hearted old widow testified the most exuberant joy. She insisted upon going herself to redeem all my things from the pawnbroker's; and while she sallied forth upon that errand, I went out and purchased the materials for a comfortable repast. Mrs. Scudder, on her return with the packages, sat down with us; and we were all three exceedingly happy. I need scarcely add that the letter which I had written to Selina Temple was torn up; and it was not one of the least ingredients of the sum of my felicity that circumstances should have so opportunely rendered it unnecessary to despatch the epistle at all.

That day I sent off another sovereign to poor Mrs. Messiter; and this time I could indeed truthfully tell her that a change in my position enabled me to do so. Nor did I now forbid her from writing to me on any pretext whatsoever. I enjoyed a far more comfortable night than for some weeks past I had known; and next day it was with a real feeling of pride, as well as of satisfaction, that I was enabled to go and make the requisite purchases for a good dinner for the Sunday. Jane accompanied me; and never had she appeared more gay, more smiling, or more happy. As he had anticipated, William was enabled to join us at an early hour on the Sabbath morning; and the moment he made his appearance, his first words were, "Well, Mary, this time Mr. Sands has *not* forgotten his promise. Here is the address of a family where you are to call to-morrow; and from what Mr. Sands has told me, I think that you will be happy there."

I was well pleased with this announcement. We all sat down to breakfast; and when it was over, Jane and I, once again dressed in our best apparel, accompanied William to church,—Mrs. Scudder undertaking to remain at home and perform certain little duties which I had entrusted to her. On our return from church, I found that she had acquitted herself of that task: a comfortable dinner was served up in her own neat little parlour—we made her preside—and after the meal, a bottle of British wine, some cakes, apples, and pears, were served up as dessert. We were all as happy as possible, the only drawback being on the poor widow's account, the expected letter from her son at Portsmouth being still delayed. That Sunday was indeed altogether one of the happiest I ever passed in my life.

END OF VOLUME I.

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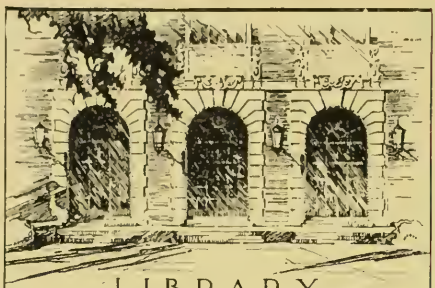

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